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PROFILES IN POVERTY

A Study of Five Poor Working Women

LEELA GULATI

Centre for Development Studies
Ulloor, Trivandrum 695 011

1979

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The focus of my five profiles is on the lives and problems of five poor working women living on the outskirts of the city of Trivandrum, the capital of the State of Kerala.

Both Kerala and the problems of the poor as such are already much researched.[1] What is different about my profiles is that they deal with, I believe, the poorest of the poor, namely the poor working women.

Choice of occupational groups

I started to work on these profiles to learn in depth about the lives of working women. In choosing my five women I went by the broad occupational distribution of the female working population in the State of Kerala. According to the 1971 Census, the female work participation rate in Kerala State is about 13.68%, a figure slightly higher than the all-India figure of 13.18. These figures, however, are belived to grossly understate women's work participation by not including the secondary workers.[2]

Sixty percent of the working women in Kerala are in the primary sector. Out of every 100 women engaged in this sector, 80 are agricultural labourers. For the country as a whole, nearly 83% are engaged in the primary sector.

While only 17% of the working women in the country as a whole are engaged in non-primary sectors, the corresponding proportion for Kerala is 40%, divided equally between secondary and tertiary sectors. Kerala has always offered its women opportunity and scope to work in several traditional industries very much localised to the State, as, for example, coir and cashew industries.

While one of my profiles is of an agricultural labourer, two

are of women engaged in industries, one in coir and the other in brick making. Of the remaining two, one is a fish vendor and the other is a construction worker.

Clearly, if my sample of five was to be statistically representative, I should have chosen three women engaged in agriculture and one each for the secondary and tertiary sectors. However, it was not that sort of representation that I was aiming at. If I could do a larger number of profiles, I would probably have tried to have women working in still different occupations so that one had an idea of the kinds of similarities that existed between them.

Choice of persons

Having more or less decided on the occupational categories I was going to cover, I had to look around for the women that I could actually study. I knew that I just couldn't knock on any door and subject the persons there to the kind of intensive questioning I had in mind. I first needed to build a sort of rapport with the respondents so that I could study things in a most natural atmosphere. In my experience, what proved most useful was a proper entry. It almost seemed to hold the secret of success. Let me illustrate my method of selection by explaining in detail my choice of the female agricultural labourer, Kalyani.

I first tried to pick up conversation with women workers in a nearby construction site. There was one woman construction worker who was far more responsive and open than others. She showed some curiosity in the questions and topics I would raise. Once she was reasonably certain that I was not being contemptuous in my interest, she invited me to her house. She lives in a squatter settlement[3] which had sprung up about two kilometres outside the city limits of Trivandrum. In this settlement, live some twelve women who are working as agricultural labourers. She introduced me to all these twelve women over the span of a few

visits and explained to them the purpose of my visit. The women were rather amused that somebody wanted to study what they were doing. They wanted to know what kind of material benefits would accrue to them by co-operating with me, a valid question indeed. It was very heart-breaking to explain that by answering my questions, they would not stand to benefit in any way, except help me understand their problems better. The women thought that it was a joke and also that I must be crazy. Still they were relaxed with me from the very beginning. I possibly aroused their curiosity and also provided some entertainment in their dull, drab life. Of these twelve women, I found out that not only was Kalyani living in possibly the humblest of huts but also she was the most co-operative, forthcoming and unreserved in her conversations with me. So I decided on her.

From the very outset I knew also that the person whom I chose for my study would have to be a person who would trust me, accept me as a friend and persevere with me for a long period. I kept in close touch with Kalyani for practically two years, 1976 and 1977.

During this period, I visited Kalyani's house several times and went to her work site many times either to talk to her or watch her work. As a result of these visits, I came to know her husband and her children. In fact I was very soon made to feel welcome whenever I went. I tried to know about her also from her neighbours, co-workers, employers and all the other people with whom she normally came in contact in her usual day to day life. Among these were the people owning or working in the tea shops, shop keepers and the grocery store owners. But, I did not keep this a secret from Kalyani. In fact, she introduced me to several of these persons and then I developed further contacts with them.

Though in my selection, a certain bias may be said to be present, still, I have no reason to believe that Kalyani's life represents that of an odd agricultural labourer. Kalyani, with all her individualities,

typifies a woman agricultural labourer in this part of the world.

My other four selections were made, more or less, similarly. I tried first to meet 10 or 12 women engaged in a particular occupation and then narrowed down my choice to one of them, on the basis principally of her willingness to cooperate. In fact, even in the choice of the occupational group itself, particularly when it came to choosing the brick and construction workers, I was influenced considerably by this consideration of accessibility.

Method of investigation

My method of collecting information combined a number of approaches. To start with, I canvassed a simple questionnaire and followed it up by interviews and observation. Once I knew a person well, I tried to get him or her to narrate to me the various incidents in their lives. Sometimes, it was possible to interview older members of the family in the ancestral homes. Three out of my five principal respondents, i.e. the working women who are the centre-pieces of my profiles, were born and brought up in locations other than where they are currently residing. I could visit the places where they were born and raised and talk to the neighbours and relatives there. In all the three cases, either the principal respondent, her husband or her grown up son or daughter accompanied me on these outstation visits.

The questionnaire was used mainly to get certain basic information on household composition, and an inventory of household possessions like animals, furniture, clothing, pots and pans etc. Most biographical information was collected in interviews. In observation, I could note down the actual interactions at work, in the house and on the road side.

I refrained altogether from using a tape recorder. In poor neighbourhoods, of the type I was studying, it might, I was afraid, evoke so much excitement all round that it would not be possible to conduct my investigations. I did, however, take down notes in the

course of my interviews and amplified them once I returned home the same very day. Also I would note down all the impressions gained by me during the course of the day while they were fresh in my memory.

After I got to know the persons well, I would invite them to visit me at my house. Firstly it enabled me to reciprocate their hospitality. Secondly, it satisfied their curiosity about my family and style of living. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, it fostered their confidence and trust in me.

Meeting these persons in their houses always caused some amount of interest in a neighbourhood where everything gets noticed. When they visited me, I could talk to them without disturbance and in complete privacy. They were always much more communicative. Not only have all my principal respondents visited me over a period of time but also their husbands, if they were around, and their children, young as well as grown up.

Though the central focus of my study was on the working woman, my attempt was to capture the total picture of her family at the present time. I tried to interview all the members separately and know what each of them thought about the family's problems and also what sort of problem each of them had to face individually in work or at home. In this way, I could get a closer view of the day to day working of the whole household and the intra-family relationships.

My profiles go, in one sense, much beyond the immediate households in which these five working women live because, at times, to get the total picture it was necessary to cover others as well. For instance to have an idea of the problems that bothered the brick worker, I found it necessary to study the lives also of her married daughters living away from her. Then it was found necessary to study each occupation or industry in sufficient detail to understand, and to give an appreciation of, the role, the woman working in it, performed.

Thus in order to obtain the total picture, I must have interviewed, on an average, 50 persons for each of my profiles. These included close relatives, friends, neighbours, co-workers, employers, money lenders and shop keepers that each family came into contact with. Whatever stories, I have narrated in the course of these profiles, could thus be checked and double checked by me.

Duration of study

In almost every case, the family was studied for a period of two years. In order to get to understand the full rhythm of the work and life, this extended period of observation was found to be very useful. For instance, this enabled me to observe things when life was very very hard for the fish vendor and also when it was a little less hard.

Though the basic problem of living in poverty may be the same viz., lack of income or wherewithal, the peculiar problems each family faces, given the totality of its circumstances, and its responses can be quite different. If I have been able to convey, through my profiles, an idea of this diversity it should be a step further towards understanding and tackling our most important problem of the day.

Notes and References

1. See T.N. Srinivasan and P.K. Bardhan, eds., Poverty and Income Distribution in India, 1974 and United Nations, Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy - A Case Study of Selected Issues with Reference to Kerala, 1975.

2. See Leela Gulati, Occupational Distribution of Working Women, Economic and Political Weekly, October 28, 1975, p.1692.

3. See Leela Gulati, Rationing in a Peri-urban Community, Case Study of a Squatter Settlement, Economic and Political Weekly, March 19, 1977, p.501.

Chapter II

KALYANI, THE AGRICULTURAL LABOURER

Kalyani is a thirty five year old Pulaya,[1] scheduled caste, agricultural labourer who lives in a squatter settlement on the outskirts of the city of Trivandrum.[2] She lives here in a small mud hut perched precariously on a narrow strip of land with her husband and five children. She is less than five feet in height but well built. She is very dark in complexion and usually wears clothes of very bright colours. A deep lemon yellow tight fitting blouse with a bright red and white checked lungi, the wrap around skirt, are her favourite ensemble. She prefers strong colours as they do not show dirt easily. Her teeth are all stained at the edges with arecanut juice but you cannot still miss her beaming white teeth when she smiles. She always wears a warm and affectionate smile and is willing to talk and be friendly. It is her pleasant temperament that makes her very approachable to one and all.

The hut

Kalyani's is the last of the seventeen huts which stand in a semi-circular row facing the metalled road that passes by the squatter settlement. Hers is a very humble hut, compared to the other huts in the settlement. You have to approach her hut from the metalled road. One has, however, to climb down a good 10 feet below the road level. To do this, one goes down a flight of steps which have been paved irregularly with stones. Her husband, Posha, is very good at such things and spends his spare time, or the day he does not have work, doing some renovation or the other to the hut or the plot. Of all the seventeen huts, Kalyani's is the most easily approachable because of the pains taken to make the path. Once you reach the hut, you are struck by the stark simplicity of the mud house with a thatched roof contrasted by the fantastic backdrop. Standing in her front yard, which is not big, you see the steep slope of the adjoining white clay hill. The lake at

When you enter the room, you are struck by the fact that there are no ventilators or windows. The room walls are absolutely bare except for the small broken mirror stuck in a corner on the wall. Kalyani had picked it up long back from the road side. There is a clothes line going from one wall to the other with a few clothes neatly folded and hanging on it. It is in this room that the family eats and the women, ie. Kalyani and her two daughters, sleep in the night.

Next to the main room is the small kitchen. You go to the kitchen through a doorway. The other three sides of the room have no openings whatsoever. This is the third and final part of the cul-de-sac tunnel that Kalyani's hut really is. It is also the darkest part of the hut. It is so dark that Kalyani and Nirmala, her daughter, have to light an oil lamp while cooking in day time. On one side close to the wall, she has her two mud stoves. Towards the back wall, you can see wood shavings and twigs that Nirmala has collected. An uri, [3] basket made out of matted arecanut palm leaves, hangs from the roof; it is a device, used to store the vessel with left over rice away from rats and cats, which is easily available in the village market for 50 paise.

The husband's work

Mosha is Kalyani's forty year old husband. He too is quite short, being only five feet tall. He usually wears a rather lost look. When he is not at work, he likes to wear a striped lungi and a bush shirt and carries a small towel on his shoulders to wipe his face from sweat or tie it around his head. His hair is well groomed, showing liberal use of coconut oil.

When the family first moved to the settlement, things were not as bad as they became afterwards. Mosha was still the main bread winner of the family though Kalyani worked all along. Mosha was working mostly loading and unloading trucks, with granite stones or sand. He had to set out for work early in the morning. He would present himself at the

petrol station, at the point where trucks stopped by. When there was work, the truck driver would come by and hire him for the day. His job was to go in the truck to the quarry along with other loaders, four or five in all, load the truck with granite stones and then go with the truck to the construction sites where the stones had to be unloaded. Usually, it involved long hours. Kalyani therefore never expected him till eight in the evening.

Though Mosha's working day was long, the wage his job carried was also higher, being nine to Rs.12 per day depending on the tonnage of stones loaded and unloaded during the day. He bought his breakfast, lunch and tea outside when he was out at work. In addition, he spent quite an amount daily on beedics, country cigarettes with tobacco rolled into dry leaves and pans, folded betel leaves holding arecanut pieces and lined with lime. Usually, therefore, he was able to give Kalyani five rupees or so on a working day. "This is much more than what many other men bring back home from work, though it is just about half his daily wage." Kalyani was therefore able to run her house quite smoothly until one of their sons fell sick, was hospitalised and eventually passed away.

Soon after their little son passed away, things started taking a turn for the worse. Mosha started complaining of severe stomach trouble. He not only complained of pain but also had rectal bleeding. He went to the nearby Medical College Hospital. When he did not show any signs of improvement as an out-patient, he had to be hospitalised. He was in the hospital twice, first for eight days and again for three weeks. In all he spent a month in the hospital. Once he was hospitalised, Kalyani was the only one to sustain her family. In fact, she also had to buy Mosha's medicines, and supplement his hospital food.

Pledging the ratior card

It was then that Kalyani decided to pledge her ration card with a friend. Pledging the ration card it is believed, is quite a common practice not only in the settlement but throughout the State. 4/

She was fully aware that pledging the ration card meant that everyone would get even less to eat because then she would have to buy rice at the open market price which was much higher. Also she would not be able to encash her sugar entitlement any longer. By giving up her sugar entitlement she could easily make an extra few rupees every month. She had to mortgage her card all the same as she had nothing else of value in the house to pledge. Kalyani needed the money badly and was happy that at least she had a ration card to pledge. She pledged it with a friehd of hers who has a regular government job and borrowed Rs.100. Being an 11 unit card, it would normally fetch a loan of Rs.110. Roughly a unit on a card fetches Rs.10. Though she borrowed initially Rs.100 it was not enough. She had to borrow subsequently another Rs.50. In all, she has now to repay Rs.150 to get back her card. However, this loan saw her and the family through a very difficult period till Mosha eventually got back once again on his feet.

Mosha took more than a month after his second hospritalisation to feel well enough to go out for work. He resumed work slowly, first going back to the paddy fields to help plough, manure and harvest. These jobs were easier for him than lifting granite stones. Once he gained enough strength, he started on his old job of loading granite stones. For quite some months, almost a whole year, he was not able to do the job continuously because his back would hurt. Naturally, his credentials were not fully re-established as a truck loader and he was taken on only when an extra hand was needed. Much more recently, he has started getting work regularly. Kalyani, on the other hand, has been always on the look out for some work or the other since the family has come to depend on her as the principal bread winner.

The children

Kalyani and Mosha have now three sons and two daughters. Their first born is a son, named Narayanan. They call him Niren for short. He is sixteen years of age but has been to school only for three years.

Kalyani's explanation for not sending him to school is that he did not have any decent clothes to wear to school. Niren now mostly loiters around street corners and is friendly with people dealing in illicit liquor in the settlement. Kalyani does not approve of this and wants him badly to do work, like the 14 year old son of the neighbouring brick woman but Niren is still very irresponsible. If he is not loitering and is at home, it is worse; he bosses over his sister, Nirmala, without being of any help either in minding the children or housework. But Kalyani takes a very realistic attitude on this. 'By making life unpleasant for him, all that will happen is that he will run away like many other children of his age in the neighbourhood.' Mosha feels differently. He feels that Kalyani's attitude encourages Niren to be irresponsible. Niren makes himself scarce therefore when the father is around and plays it very quiet. Mosha never gives him any money to spend.

Niren recently got into trouble with the police because of an errand he was doing for a bootlegging gang. This was during the Emergency. All that Kalyani heard was that he was whisked away by the police. She knew that the police had become very tough. So things could be rough for Niren. She spent some very anxious moments. She went to several Devi[5/] temples and took a couple of vows, one to donate five rupees to the temple for a chicken sacrifice and the other to offer sweet rice to the temple when Niren came back. Finally, Niren was found safe with Mosha's parents in their village. But Kalyani had to honour her temple vows.

Niren does find some work once in a while but he never shares his wages with the family. He spends it all either on movies or in eating places with friends. Whenever he has no money, and that is very often, he eats at home. However, Kalyani never gets angry with him, afraid that he might do something to himself.

Nirmala, the 12-13 year old daughter, is really the day housekeeper. She too attended school only for three years. Kalyani took Nirmala out of school when one of her children, a boy, fell seriously ill and had to be hospitalised. Kalyani badly needed Nirmala at home while she herself

was out at work or with her son in hospital. Nirmala never went back to school, thereafter.

Though more than 12 years' old, Nirmala looks just an eight year old. Though very frail, she has a gentle face. She is the one who fetches water, collects fire wood, cooks the mid-day meal; buys the required grocery and looks after the children. She works from seven in the morning till six in the evening. Nirmala has virtually seen no childhood. She has straightaway graduated to being a housewife. She already acts a little mother at this tender age.

Of all her chores, however, Nirmala finds looking after the children, particularly her two little brothers the whole day long, the most nerve racking job. They frequently quarrel and get bruised all over. The terrain on the back is very steep and in the front is the busy road. Nirmala feeds and bathes them and tries to keep them away from trouble. Kalyani confesses that she herself cannot stand the confusion in the house for a single day. So she prefers to be at work just to get away from all this.

A small kerosene lamp, made out of a tin can, burns all the time, while Nirmala works, in the kitchen. In the morning, she gives the children kanji, rice gruel, a left over of the previous evening, for breakfast. For the afternoon meal, for the kids and herself, she cooks some rice, when necessary. Usually, they have to make do with cooked rice left over from the previous evening. She has a mud stove and four aluminium pots stacked in the Kitchen. Next to her stove are also the other vital kitchen gadgets like a grinding stone and a coconut grater that one finds in almost all the households in the squatter settlement. There are also a few tin cans containing, separately, red chillies, salt, tumeric powder and coriander seeds in small quantities and a small bottle containing coconut oil, which the family uses mostly for oiling their hair.

After Nirmala comes Vani who is nine years old. Vani has never been to school so far. Actually she is the only child of that age in the squatter settlement who is not going to school. Kalyani did not send her to school because she did not have proper clothes to wear. Both Kalyani and Mosha are aware that being scheduled caste entitles them to even some cash benefit every year if Vani goes to school. But now that Vani is nine years old, Kalyani plans very soon to put her in charge of the domestic chores and send Nirmala out to work, part time at least, along with the neighbouring brick worker. Already, Vani helps Nirmala with the care of the two youngsters and also does some other small errands for her like shopping for groceries and collecting twigs.

The remaining two children, both boys, named Raju and Vijayan, are pre-schoolers. One is five years old and the other three years old. Kalyani plans to send them both to school if her situation improves, which she hopes will happen when Mosha gets work regularly and Nirmala and Nirmala start earning.

Kalyani lost a male child four-five years back. He had a severe attack of infantile paralysis. She had him hospitalised for eight months but without any result. Later, when he was discharged, she put him under Ayurvedic treatment, a treatment following the ancient indigenous system of medicine. The child died however after being an invalid for a year. His illness involved a lot of expenses for Kalyani.

Family planning

Except for the first two children who were delivered at home with the help of relatives, Kalyani delivered the other four at the nearby hospital. Of the six children born to her, five have survived.

Kalyani is very much aware of the fact that she has a rather large family and that there are devices to limit the [illegible]. [illegible] have visited her several times to persuade her to undergo sterilisation. Once she agreed to go to the hospital with three other women from

neighbourhood but gave them the slip out of fear. She is scared of the operation and also of its after effects. A few of her friends, she says, developed septic conditions after the operation. When pressed, however, she would not identify the friends concerned. The fact remains that Kalyani fears she may not be able to work as well thereafter and she has got to be fit to keep the family fed. Mosha, her husband, has only just recovered fully from his stomach trouble and Niren has not taken to work.

According to the neighbours Mosha went in for vasectomy some years back to get the cash that goes with it but would not admit it now because Kalyani has since given birth to two sons, Raju and Vijayan. Both Mosha and Kalyani deny this story emphatically,

Childhood and marriage

Kalyani's both parents were agricultural labourers living in a village called Karikotti, 20 kilometres south of Trivandrum. The four children, all girls, were born to her mother in the house. Kalyani was the third one. She lost her father when she was about nine years old. He was around fifty then. Her mother died four years later. The eldest sister, Vellamma, who was already married, moved the three girls to her husband's house. The husband was a coconut plucker by profession. When he was not plucking coconuts he would do either agricultural labour or some construction work. They were living together in a hut on land belonging to some big landlord as caretakers.

As Bhagavathy, the girl immediately after Vellamma grew up she became the second wife to her erstwhile brother-in-law.[6/] But when Kalyani was around 16 years of age, they found for her a Pulaya boy, Mosha, in the same village. Mosha, which is really a short name for Moses, is Christian. However his was not a church wedding. Kalyani did not have to change her religion therefore at the time of her marriage and she continued to be a Hindu, though only a scheduled caste

Hindu. It was a simple wedding with no jewellery or exchange of dowry. All she got was a new set of clothes. Kalyani went to live in her husband's house. Mosha's family was squatting on government land there. Later when her two elder sisters and their common husband moved to Trivandrum, Mosha and Kalyani also decided to move with them. Omana, the sister younger to Kalyani, was also married by now and she too came to the same Trivandrum suburb.

It was here that her brother-in-law died and Vellamma and Bhagavathy, the two sisters, became widows. Vellamma wanted to live thereafter with her husband's younger brother as his wife.[7] So the two sisters could not, any longer, get along in the same hut. They were looking for a place where they could have two separate huts. It was during this time that they heard about people squatting on Government land nearby. So all the four sisters decided to move there and put up separate huts. They needed to be together for so many reasons. This way, they felt, they could readily help each other in time of need. Also, the children could be together. Three of the sisters found enough place to put up their huts next to each other. Only Kalyani had to move slightly away from them but still she was in the same neighbourhood. So out of the cluster of 46 households in the neighbourhood, four belong to Kalyani and her three sisters. Vellamma, the eldest sister and her two children, one boy and one girl, now live with her dead husband's brother while Bhagavathy is living by herself with her teenage daughter. Bhagavathy has been in a bad state of health however. She is out of the hospital now but is not able to do any hard work. She, with the help of her daughter, earns a very meagre livelihood by collecting medicinal herbs and special kinds of grass used for manufacturing Ayurvedic medicines. Like Kalyani, she too has pawned away her ration card for a loan .100.

Agricultural work

Kalyani considers herself, first and foremost, an agricultural labourer. Paddy cultivation is, as she herself puts it, in her narrow

and bones. However, work on the paddy fields is not available throughout the year, even though paddy is raised in Trivandrum district twice a year. Both these crops, Virippu and Mundakan, are timed with the onset of Monsoons. Virippu crop is watered by the South West Monsoon, which commences sometimes in May and lasts till September and Mundakan crop is watered by the North East Monsoon; which commences in September and lasts till February.

Thus for three months, between January-February and May of a calendar year, there is no work in the paddy fields. Even for the nine months of the year covered by the two paddy crops, Virippu and Mundakan, work is not available to Kalyani all through. This is because, as we shall see presently, (a) women are not involved fully in all stages of paddy cultivation, and (b) scheduled caste women are particularly excluded from certain operations.

Broadly, paddy cultiyation can be divided into six stages, beginning with the preparation of the field which involves ploughing, clod crushing, harrowing and bed preparation for the nursery. Once the previous crop is harvested, the fields have to be ploughed and cross-ploughed to bring in the required tilth. In recent years, it has become a common practice to have the land dug with mammaty, a sort of spade, using manual labour in place of the bullocks or buffaloes. One digging with the mammaty is considered equivalent to four ploughings by animals. Kalyani's husband, Mosha, went for this work when he was not on his regular job because of his bad back. During some very short periods in the course of a year, the demand for men who are willing to do this work is great. However, only men from the lowest castes are willing to do this work. But Kalyani gets no work at that time in the paddy fields. Digging and other operations involved in the preparation of the field are considered exclusively male jobs. When clods have to be crushed, this too is done by men.

The second operation is that of repairing and strengthening of

bunds and redoing their surface to ensure a steady supply of water. Though this again is essentially a male operation, women like Kalyani do get a day or two's job to carry basket loads of mud, either to the bund or away from the bund as the case may be.

Manuring, which comes next, is done just before the last ploughing. This is again an exclusively male job, from the beginning to end. Men are employed to do basal manuring. Later, when chemical fertilisers are applied as top dressing after weeding, again men alone are employed. Women agricultural labourers have no role to play. Occasionally, they may have to carry basket loads of cow dung to the field only after the sowing has been done.

For the fourth operation, namely sowing rice, there are two alternative methods, broadcasting and transplanting. The latter is most commonly used in this part of Trivandrum for both the Virippu and Mundakan crops. Seedlings are first grown on a small raised portion of the field where the flow of water can be maintained at a steady pace. A nursery on 10 cents (100 cents = 1 acre) of land yields seedlings sufficient for transplanting an acre. When the plant puts forth six leaves and is about 15" in height, it is said to be ready for transplanting. The preparation of the nursery, its sowing, manuring and weeding are all done by men.

Kalyani comes into the picture only when the seedling are ready for transplanting. In this part of Trivandrum district, transplanting is normally a female job. In fact, on the fields for which Kalyani has been working, transplanting is still essentially done by scheduled caste and tribal women. Kalyani's explanation is two-fold: Firstly, it is messy and a back breaking job which high caste women shun. One has to stand hours on end in slush and mud whether it is rain or sun or learn to move backwards while stooping. Secondly, high caste women do not possess skills to do this job well. Transplanting needs skill, says Kalyani, as the success of crop depends on the way it is transplanted.

Actually, however, high caste women are known to be engaged in transplanting in other parts of Trivandrum as well as Kerala.

Kalyani tries to get as much work as possible during the transplanting season, going from one field to the other, never skipping a day. Since transplanting cannot be spread over a longer period, there is a great demand for women labourers during this short period. Very often the tribal women come down from the neighbouring hills looking for work during these days. Some landlords go to the nearby villages to see if women agricultural labourers would come to cope with the work. But for any one woman worker the maximum number of days she can expect to get work in one transplanting season hardly ever exceeds 21 days.

Weeding is the next operation. After transplanting, water has to be kept in the field to a depth of about two inches till the crop matures. Before the crop matures, however, a couple of weedings are necessary. The first weeding is done a month after transplanting. Where 10 women are needed for transplanting only one is needed for weeding. The second weeding takes place after another one month or so, but only if it is considered necessary. Thus some fields might do with just one weeding in a season. Kalyani gets between three and five days of work to do weeding each season. On the fields she has been working for, she herself has no problem of getting the weeding job if and when it is to be done. But there are many other women who are not assured of employment for weeding. The actual number of women days devoted to weeding depends in particular on the growth of weeds in the fields.

When we come to the next operation, viz., harvesting, it is interesting that around Trivandrum district it is again essentially a male operation. In many other districts of Kerala, however, women also participate in the harvesting of the paddy crop. Paddy harvesting is a coveted job as it is paid for in kind. The wages are tied to the proportion of paddy harvested and this is divided among the number of men harvesting. Once the paddy is harvested and gathered up into

kattas, (the local name for bundles) the men transport it to the threshing floor in the cultivator's house or yard. Before leaving the yard, the men give each of the kattas a couple of vigorous beatings on the threshing floor.

Threshing starts only after the entire field belonging to a particular cultivator has been harvested. Usually, women of higher castes do threshing in the night after finishing the household chores. The work has to be finished as quickly as possible, so that minimum damage takes place. Since the bundles are generally stacked in an open yard, they are exposed to rats and other insects. Also an unforseen rain can do damage. Women work in a group of 12 or more depending on the amount of paddy to be threshed. A team of six to eight women does the actual threshing while the other women do the job of collecting the paddy ears, removing the threshed stacks and adding on new stacks to be threshed. As women beating the paddy get tired, they take over the less strenuous job from those who replace them. The whole operation is quite strenuous. Usually rice kanji, boiled rice water, is distributed among them at two hourly intervals, to quench their thirst and to replenish their energy.

Winnowing is done in groups of two; one woman who does the preliminary winnowing and sorts out the unripened paddy ears from the ripe ones, and the other woman who re-does the winnowing operations before it is ready to be dried and stored. The chaff is separated and collected to be given to the cattle as fodder and to be sold as such.

The major operations with the paddy are then over. The tasks of boiling the paddy and polishing the rice are [illegible] on a piece-meal basis as and when rice is to be sold or consumed. [illegible] are also performed by women.

Kalyani, being a scheduled caste [illegible] got the threshing or winnowing jobs. [illegible] and winnowing were done in the compound of the [illegible]'s house.

caste, particularly scheduled caste, women were not employed for the purpose. According to Kalyani, somehow the old practice still persists except that Ezhava and Achari women manage to get the threshing jobs. She also knows of some women of her own caste getting employment for threshing and winnowing. But Kalyani herself has never done this so far. When questioned if she is excluded because she does not possess the required skills, Kalyani laughs. According to her, she does not get the job because, (a) it is a dry, and therefore neat job, (b) one gets paddy as wage and(c) the upper caste women do not like to let her into the yard and share their kanji. However, no one verbalises the reasons openly. As for the skill, it is easy to swing the stick in a rythmical fashion. One acquires the skill in no time.

Thus since the paddy operations are so designed that (a) the sexes have particular roles to perform and (b) the scheduled caste women are excluded even from certain female operations, Kalyani gets no more than 30 days of work every season or 60 days of work in a year.

Other work

During the current year, Kalyani has taken up jobs on construction sites, for brick kilns and in collecting medicinal herbs. All the jobs outside of agriculture that she comes by, and this is not always easy, are in the nature of transporting head loads. During the three months, February to May, when construction work is usually at its peak, she may get as much as 15 days work every month. It has to be remembered, however, that she is always the extra hand to be taken or when anybody already working fails to turn up or has to be dropped. All told, it appears that Kalyani is able to get, on average, 60 days of work in a year in various non-agricultural jobs. The period when it is the hardest to get jobs, is when the rains set in but it is not yet time to transplant. There is usually a gap of a whole month between the onset of monsoon and the time when Kalyani is called to do transplanting. This is the time when building activity too is at low ebb, brick kilns

are staggering their work, and there is not much other work to be foun .

A transplanting day

Kalyani wakes up rather early, around five o' clock, and goes down the hill to use any corner behind a bush for toilet. The bush area close to the squatter settlement has been divided roughly equally into male and female zones. So she does not have to worry about male intrusion on her privacy. Still she prefers the early dark hours to finish with this daily routine. She is back in the hut in about half an hour. She then cleans her teeth with rice husk powder. Immediately thereafter, Kalyani takes a pan; her special variety coated on the inside with a layer of lime and contain bits of arecanut and tobacco is locally called murukkan. She always keeps one of these in reserve from the previous day. She combs her well oiled hair with a small wooden comb in front of the broken mirror on the wall. The whole family uses the same comb but their hair is not as well oiled as hers. Kalyani has a hair switch which she bought sometime back for 50 paise. She needs the switch to give her bun some body. Otherwise, she would have to re-do her hair several times while transplanting or, for that matter, while doing any other kind of job. She would then go to the municipal water tap to fetch some water for the house. Before going to fetch water, she wakes up Nirmala.

After she has brought two vessels of water, she changes into her work clothes. These are usually a checked red and white lungi wrapped on top of a knee length petticoat, and a small blouse on top. Her blouse is stitched in the current style with a low neck line. Instead of using hooks, she secures the blouse with three safety pins. Most working women in the neighbourhood like to pin their blouses instead of using hooks or buttons. A blouse without buttons is stitched cheaper by 50 paise. Kalyani covers her breasts and shoulders with a towel. She does not wear, or have, any footwear. Nor does she have an umbrella. Last year, she had a plastic bag which she had bought to protect her [illegible] rain. But the children [illegible] working in the [illegible]

tore it up. This year, she has not bothered to get a new one.

By half past six she would be at the coffee shop, run by a Nair woman right in the squatter settlement itself. She buys herself a cup of tea and two puttus, a preparation of steamed rice powder mixed with coconut and green chillies, served with steamed whole green gram and papnadams, a kind of indigenous lentil wafer. Often, Niren too comes along and insists on having the same breakfast instead of left over rice gruel, kanji, at home with his younger brothers and sisters. Though Kalyani cannot afford it, she feels embarassed saying no to him.

At seven o' clock, she presents herself for work. Usually, she would know the previous evening where she is needed and goes straight to the nursery where she has to pull out the saplings. Kalyani would be joined there by other women. Ordinarily, there would be three to four women with her on job.

Before starting her work, Kalyani has to adjust her dress. She folds up her lungi in such a way that it is just knee length. She ties the towel, that she otherwise uses as her upper cloth, round her head to protect it from the sun. She tucks her stock of betel leaves in the small pouch she makes at her waist. Keeping her feet apart, Kalyani would bend down, gently pulling the rice saplings. She uses both hands, one to pull out and the other to hold the pulled out saplings. If the field has been well watered, the seedlings come out easily. Every two minutes she pulls out enough saplings to make a bundle. Before making a bundle, she has to dig her heel into the soil to raise her level, which she beats the roots a couple of times to get rid of the mud. Sometimes she carries with her a coconut leaf stem to beat the roots on that. Before tying up the bundle with a coconut leaf string she must weed out the grass and other stray plants. The first half of the day is spent thus, pulling out seedlings and bundling them up.

The break comes around 11 o' clock, by when each woman is supposed to have made 100 bundles. These bundles are kept in a [illegible] for the

nursery bund. The break is of about one hour when Kalyani and other women go to the nearby tea/coffee shop. During the transplanting time, these shops serve coffee brewed with ginger, which is supposed to keep off colds, and sweetened with palm sugar. Kalyani does not have a rice meal but makes do with a couple of fried lentil doughnuts, called vadas. She feels that she cannot digest a rice meal when she is doing transplanting. On other working days, she buys herself a full rice meal which costs one rupee but does not take any extras like meat or fish curry so that she has more money to take back home.

Around mid-day, starts actual transplanting of seedlings. Kalyani holds the bundle in one hand and transplants with the other, all the time bending forward. Three or four saplings are taken together and planted in a hole. You step backward after each transplant. Once she has transplanted all the saplings in her 100 bundles, her day's work is done.

Time passes fast as the women keep talking to one another, or even hold conversation with people passing by, most of whom are known to them. Amongst themselves, the conversation usually revolves around marriage proposals, the temple priest and the children. If, in between, they have to ease themselves, they do it right there while working so that no one even notices it except possibly the woman working closeby. Since all of them tend to do the same, it is the accepted practice.

But Kalyani has to take time off every half hour to take a fresh pan. If she falls short of her supply, she would ask somebody passing by to buy it for her. She must have her full quota of pans while she is transplanting.

If a field is reasonably well-puddled, the day's transplanting is over by about four o' clock in the afternoon. During the peak of the transplanting season, however, when there is [illegible] women to hire, transplanting may go on till six o' clock in the evening. Normally, however, on transplanting days Kalyani is back in return from work well before sun set.

Daily shopping

Kalyani collects her wage in cash. The daily wage this year (1976-77) is seven rupees. For some years now, the wage in agriculture is the same as for unskilled work in construction. So Kalyani earns the same seven rupees whether she is working in the fields or on construction. She does all her major grocery shopping on her way back from work. Usually, the children know where she has gone to work and can guess the time when she will be back. If she has gone for transplanting or weeding she is back around five o' clock and if she has gone to a construction site she does not come back before six o' clock. Vani, the second daughter, would usually wait for her mother at the road junction near the squatter settlement where there is a small market. She carries with her a small basket for rice and groceries and two bottles, one for kerosene and one for coconut oil.

The market consists of a few tea and beedi shops, a couple of grocery shops and one or two vegetable shops. Between five and seven in the evening, some 10 to 12 women vegetable and fish vendors gather to sell their wares in the open space near the shops. Mud pots are also on sale in the evening bazaar, a completely female affair, because usually the buyers and sellers are women. Working women like Kalyani do their daily shopping here.

Kalyani's household runs from day to day. She buys not only vegetables and fish everyday but also groceries, particularly rice, oil and kerosene.

Since she is no longer in possession of her ration card she has to buy all her rice requirements in the open market where the price (Rs.2.50 per kilo.) is currently about 50 percent higher than at the fair price shop (Rs.1.62 a kilo. for the medium variety). Two years back, the free market premium was more than 100 percent. Since she buys five and three-quarter kilos of rice every week, rice alone costs Rs.4.45.

Her daily shopping basket also includes fish for one to one and a half rupee, coconut oil for 25 paise, raw coconut for 40 paise, onions and spices including tamarind, coriander and chillies for 50 paise and kerosene for 25 paise. The total amount she spends everyday comes to between seven to eight rupees, depending on whether soap has been included or not. She buys a bar of soap every third day. The days both Mosha and she are out of work, she does not buy any fish. While the grocer and the coffee shop will give her credit, the fish vendor does not sell her fish on credit.

Most of what she buys is just enough to make the night meal for the entire family. There is always some quantity of cooked rice and kanji, left over, which the children have for breakfast and lunch. Being left overnight in a mud pot it gets slightly fermented and is therefore not only somewhat richer in nutrients but also easier to digest. The kanji takes care of the two small boys, Vani and Nirmala, also Niren if he has not waken up early enough to catch up with Kalyani at the tea shop. The two small boys, who are under five years, get a midday meal at the block office under the Applied Nutrition Programme run by the State Government with CARE's assistance.[3/] Vani escorts the two little boys, each with a bowl of his own to hold upma, made out of corn flour which is first roasted in oil and then cooked with water. There are seventy other children of the neighbourhood who collect at the block office for their mid-day meal. Kalyani feels that her little son, Vijayan has a pot belly because the corn meal is not cooked with enough oil. There is a general feeling that the gramasevika, the lady official in charge of the programme, cheats on oil. It is also widely felt that children take time to get used to the corn meal upma. Initially, therefore, they go through a short phase of loose stools.

Kalyani buys tapioca [illegible] she is not [illegible]. The reasons offered for not buying tapioca more often to supplement daily rice meal, or for the daily mid-day meal, are many. First, Mosha [illegible] that tapioca does not suit her and causes great stomach discomfort to him.

Secondly, Kalyani feels that Nirmala is too small to cook tapioca. Tapioca has to be cooked in water and then drained completely to remove its bitterness. Sometimes, if the quality of the tuber is inferior, one has to do it more than once. Nirmala cannot be trusted to do it carefully. Also, she is too young and frail and may get hurt while draining the hot water. The fact however, that the family uses so little tapioca, which yields the same amount of calories for half the controlled price, can be said to contribute to the family's, particularly the children's, undernourishment.2/

The coconut oil Kalyani buys, is almost exclusively meant for oiling the hair. All the family members oil their hair before bath which all of them take everyday. She does not use oil for cooking her food. Kerosene, of course, is for lighting.

Distribution of calorie intake within Kalyani's household is very interesting. Practically, every one's average daily intake is below the desired level. However, on working days the deficiency is less for every one than on days when both Kalyani and Mosha are out of work. Also the deficiency is higher for children than for adults when they eat out on working days. Between children, the two girls seem to be worse of and this anyone can notice by simply looking at them.

Disposition of wage

Of the daily wage of seven rupees, Kalyani has got to pay 60 paise for her breakfast and 50 paise for her mid-day snack and tea. On working days when she is not doing transplanting she has a full rice lunch for which she has to pay one rupee. Since she must also consume a quantity of pans every day, that too has to be paid for. While on the other days she spends 50 paise on that score, her expenses during transplanting days is almost twice as high. Thus usually she is left with only five rupees from her own wage for her daily shopping. The day she has to buy soap or talcum - the latter is a must even in the humblest of

cottages in this part of the country where men, women and children smear themselves liberally with it after bath - she must cut down on her daily food items. So, something is bound to be left out. However, the day Mosha has work and gives Kalyani five rupees or more she has no problems. Indeed, if both of them have work everyday, the house can run very well. The problem arises because work is not available everyday for both Kalyani and Mosha. For every working day there is at least one that she spends without working, however hard she may try. When Mosha was in good health, he did better. For everyday he went without work he had two days of work. So, on an average, at least, one of the two was always working. In actual practice, there was always a lot of overlap. There were days when both were with or without work, and that created problems of management, which Kalyani seems to find very hard to sort out.

The past one year or so, however, has been a year of great difficulty because first Mosha was unwell for months and then he could go to work only very intermittently, may be once in three or four days. Now the end of the tunnel is well in sight with Mosha going to work more frequently. As Kalyani looks back, she considers it a miracle that the family has pulled through. Has it? The ration card remains mortgaged and the family is in refuge sharing the roof of a neighbour because its own hut is without a roof for almost two months already.

Eating out

When questioned why she spent almost two rupees and Mosha four to five rupees on eating out every working day, even when things were not too good for the family, the only answer she persisted with has been that to be able to put in a hard day's work both of them have got to eat well. Kalyani was aghast when it was suggested to her that she and Nirmala could have cooked the same breakfast at home for the entire family with less money than what [illegible] it outside. Indeed, she and Mosha could carry some sort of lunch to avoid eating out altogether.

In Kerala, however, eating out on work has become the most accepted thing. The number of catering establishments for every 1000 persons is four times as high in Kerala as for the country as a whole.[10] So while eating out by working men and women must be a major source of employment in the State, it is also possibly a major source of not only deficiency but also imbalance in food intake within a household.

To the more delicate question, why Mosha spends eating out more than twice the amount she spends (his five rupees as against her two rupees on every working day), Kalyani's answer is a clear, emphatic one. Mosha is a man and should have some freedom to spend his money as he likes. He does a far more strenuous job than she does and does not get back till eight o' clock, in the evening. So he has got to eat a lot more and oftener outside. Moreover, all men in the neighbourhood eat out on working days. Mosha does not drink and only smokes beedies. The whole neighbourhood considers him extremely well behaved. Still the fact cannot be overlooked that Mosha spends almost half of his wage eating out.

Extra cost of open market rice

Of course, if Kalyani did not have to pawn off the family's ration card during Mosha's sickness, her daily shopping basket could have been more wholesome, and less expensive. For every kilo of rice bought on the ration card, one made a saving of 78 paise. Since on her 11 unit card the weekly entitlement of rice works out to 6.160 kilos., the daily saving would amount to 77 paise (i.e. Rs.281 in a year).[11] Thus, if Kalyani could have retrieved her ration card by paying her debt of Rs.150, she could immediately effect an annual saving of almost twice as much. Whatever saving would then be effected in Mosha's expenditure outside on food and snacks would have gone not only to further improve the calory intake of the children, especially the female children, but also possibly to a better living standard for all the members of the household.

Collapse of the roof

The South West Monsoon came rather early and in force in 1977. The first few showers of the season were so heavy that not only Kalyani's thatched roof, which had not been replaced for two years, but also a part of the walled structure gave way.

The family could not stay in the house. Kalyani's three sisters lived in the same squatter settlement but their huts, with walls too made only of palm leaves, looked equally vulnerable to the fury of the weather. Also there was no room for a family of seven to move in together. Another Pulaya agricultural labourer in the settlement, with only two children, offered shelter to Kalyani and her family. Ragini, a second cousin of Kalyani, lives in a house with walls made of unbaked bricks, which are considered stronger than mud walls. Ragini and Kalyani work sometimes for the same farmers. Moreover, Mosha and Ragini's husband work together, loading and unloading trucks with granite stones from the quarries. Mosha and Kalyani did not have much of a choice. They quickly put up a brick stove next to Ragini's in her back verandah and kept their few belongings in one of her two rooms.

Kalyani and Mosha are naturally very grateful to Ragini and her husband for letting them share their roof. But then there are problems of two families living under the same roof. Lack of privacy apart, when the children are together for long hours by themselves there are bound to be quarrels and conflicts. Ragini is very accommodating but the earlier Kalyani and Mosha can retrieve their house, the better it will be for every one.

Kalyani's immediate concern is somehow to re-do the house [illegible] back as quickly as possible. If she had not mortgaged the ration card already she could have pawned it off now to borrow Rs.100 to buy new dried palm leaves and some bamboo and areca poles. Once the materials are there, Mosha can mobilise enough help to make his roof a [illegible]

the mud wall that gave way partially. Employment wise, the position has not been very bad for both Mosha and Kalyani. Lately, Mosha has been getting work for practically four days in a week regularly. Kalyani too got regular work in construction before the onset of monsoon for almost a whole month and then she got work as agricultural labourer, when transplanting time came. All the same, there is little saving that they have together been able to lay aside to re-do the house.

Husband's priorities

Evidently, Mosha had other priorities. He felt that the family had gone without new clothes for over a year. They did not buy new clothes for the last Onam, the major Hindu festival of Kerala, of 1976. He and Kalyani were really embarassed about the state of their clothes. So Mosha bought at the small cloth shop near the squatter settlement two lungis for Rs.24 and material for his shirt for Rs.15. He paid the tailor Rs.3.50. It cost Mosha a little extra because of the stiff collar he wanted for his shirt. He has paid the cloth shop Rs.30 already and has to clear another nine rupees only. (In fact he had been making small advance payments for some time) Actually, the cloth shop belongs to the same grocer - the mother runs the grocery and the son looks after the cloth shop - from whom Kalyani buys her daily grocery. Both Kalyani and Mosha have now enough new clothes to wear to work. The problem arose when Vani started crying for a new skirt. Nirmala is too grown up to voice her protests. So a week later, Mosha got another three metres of cloth, at six rupees a metre, for Vani's skirt. He paid Rs.10 in cash, leaving a balance of eight rupees to be cleared later. The cloth store has a 200 page note book where all the amounts due from different customers are written in ink. Mosha does not know to read or write but remembers the total amount (Rs.17) he still has to clear. He will probably soon buy a skirt for Nirmala too for the Onam festival. At both the grocery and the cloth shops, Mosha and Kalyani are considered as good customers who clear their debts on time. Kalyani does buy on credit

sometimes, particularly on days both she and Mosha are out of work, but either she herself or Mosha clears the amount as soon as either gets work. Right now, while Kalyani has accumulated a debt of Rs.30 with the grocer, Mosha has to pay the cloth shop Rs.17.

Kalyani feels bad that Mosha spent his money on new clothes instead of doing something about their roof. She felt moving back to her own house was much more urgent. What can she tell Mosha now? On her part she tries to take on work as often as possible, be it cutting lemon grass, collecting medicinal herbs, or carting bricks. Now that there is no job in the fields or on construction, she goes as often as possible to cart bricks. However, this work fetches only four to five rupees a day.

She even joined one of the several chit funds, an informal mutual saving society, run by a carpenter's wife in the squatter settlement. The woman promised to give Kalyani Rs.30 after she had paid her first four instalments, of three rupees each. Kalyani dutifully paid her first four instalments, but the woman could not advance her Rs.30 as some other members had defaulted. The squatter chit fund organisers face this problem of default all the time. So Kalyani quarrelled with the chit fund woman and withdrew her Rs.12, to buy up the medicines and to buy jaggery and black pepper for making a drink to ward off Niren's cold. Naturally, the prospect of re-doing the roof receded somewhat.

However, Kalyani and Mosha had made the estimate. They needed at least 100 plaited palm leaf fronds, a couple of bamboo and areca poles and some coir rope. The plaited leaves would cost Rs.70 and carting them to the house would be another eight rupees. Poles and rope would cost Rs.20-25. Thus materials alone should cost a hundred rupees. Although Mosha would do most of the manual work in fixing the walls that had given way, he would still need help in re-doing the roof. He himself is no thatcher. What about [illegible] He is of no help and has no experience either. Outside help could easily cost another Rs.15. So they must have Rs.115 to rebuild the house and to make it livable again.

Kalyani also feels that the house needs being extended so as to make two separate small rooms, one for Niren and one for Nirmala. Her immediate concern however is with re-building the roof and moving back to the hut.

If Mosha had put all his money aside instead of buying clothes they would certainly have been closer to their objective. Now they have been able to buy only half the quantity of palm fronds needed. They must somehow raise the extra funds to buy more palm leaves and other materials and raise them soon. They have already stayed with Ragini longer than they had expected.

The day Mosha works he has to work hard for such long hours that when he comes home is too tired to do anything except sleep. But he tries not to worry about the day after tomorrow. Mosha's overall attitude, is therefore relaxed. Unlike Kalyani, who is always on the look out for some work or the other, however illpaid, if Mosha does not get the regular job in the truck, he is content whiling away his time doing odds and ends in the house or is to be seen at the street corners.

Summary observations

To the neighbours in the squatter settlement, however, there is little to choose between Kalyani and Mosha. The neighbours feel that both of them live from day to day and do not worry about tomorrow. The feeling is that most of their money is spent on eating out either by themselves or with children and they are never sufficiently concerned about the future. So when their roof fell, there was not much sympathy for Kalyani and Mosha, in the settlement. If one tries to explain that at least Kalyani is much more concerned about the household than Mosha, the neighbours laugh it off saying "But Mosha is not a woman". The fact remains that Kalyani is the one much more hard pressed in every way.

Kalyani proposes to borrow, and will probably borrow, the money they need for their roof. Possibly, the people to whom she has pawned off the ration card will lend her this much more. So she will soon be

sleeping under her own roof. However, she will have, in the process, not only increased her indebtedness but also made it ever more difficult to retrieve her ration card. So the prospect of any improvement in the basic food intake in the foreseable future will thus have receded even further. As for improvement in the distribution of food intake within the family, also the prospect is not hopeful because it is most unlikely that Kalyani and Mosha will consider spending less on eating out on their working days and switching over, as far as possible, to tapioca so that every one in the house can have a considerably larger intake of calories. So the struggle to live must go on with the rules rigidly set.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Pulaya, a caste of old rice slaves, is the largest single scheduled caste in Kerala, accounting for one third of the total scheduled caste population in the State.

2. See Leela Gulati, Rationing in a Peri-Urban Community, Case Study of a Squatter Habitat, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XII, No.12, March 19, 1977, for a description of the squatter settlement.

3. Uri, is a "network for suspending pots"., See Census of India, 1961 Vol.VII, Kerala, Part VII (B) (i) Fairs and Festivals of Kerala, p.405.

4. See Leela Gulati, op.cit.

5. The deity in these Devi temples is "Shakti", the mother goddess. Though these temples are run by Ezhavas, who are not a scheduled caste, Pulayas have free access to them. See also p.103 infra.

6. Polygamy has existed among the Pulayas. Among the Malay Pulayas, i.e. those "found in the Anjanad Valley of the Devicolam taluk in North Travancore", a man may marry the sister of the first wife not only after the latter's death but even while she is still alive. (See L.A. Krishna Iyer, The Travancore Tribes and Castes, Vol.I, 1937, pp.117 to 134.) It must be added, however, that of the 16 scheduled caste households in this particular squatter settlement, this was the only case, that we came across, of polygamous marriage. Evidently, such marriage is not common.

7. Among the Malay Pulayas, the elder brother may marry the wife of his deceased younger brother and become the guardian of his children. But in this particular case, it is the wife of the deceased elder brother who starts living with the younger brother along with her children.

8. There are about 2000 feeding centres in the State, distributing mid-day meal to tribal and slum-area children. The meal contains approximately 410 calories and 15 grams of protein.

9. The fact also that tapioca, [illegible] considered, is still regarded as an inferior good could well have played a major role in this reluctance to substitute it for rice. In this particular case at least, the presumption in favour of large scale shift to tapioca among the bottom expenditure groups (See United Nations, Poverty, Unemployment and Development

Policy, A Case Study of Selected Issues with reference to Kerala, ST/ESA/29/1975, pp.48-9) is not borne out.

10. See B.D. Kale, Working Population in Kerala, in a volume by R.S. Kurup, and K.A. George (Eds.), Population Growth in Kerala, Trivandrum, 1966, pp.280-1.

11. This should be compared with the author's own earlier calculation of mortgaging a ration card. (See Leela Gulati, op.cit). That calculation was made on the assumption of an open market premium of Rs.0.40 per kilo as against the actual premium of Rs.0.78 that Kalyani has got to pay. Lately, however, the premium has declined to Rs.0.28 per kilo because of the fall in open market prices of rice.

Chapter III

JAYAMMA THE BRICK WORKER

Jayamma is a middle-aged Ezhava[1] brick worker.[2] She has six children, three boys and three girls. All her children are grown up; even her youngest, a boy, is about 14 years of age. Among her six children, four are already married and three stay separately in their own homes. Her oldest son stays with his own family, about three kilometres away from where Jayamma lives. But her two married daughters stay near her in the same neighbourhood. So the people now sharing the roof with Jayamma are 55 year old husband Kanan, her recently married son, Sukumaran, and his wife, and her teenage daughter Vanaja, and son, Anant.

The house

Jayamma lives in a medium-sized hut built on a four cent piece (cent is 1/100 of an acre) of land. The hut has three rooms, one 10 feet by 10 feet and two about five feet by eight feet. One of the latter two rooms is used as a kitchen. The other room, which is exactly the size of the kitchen, is used by Sukumaran and his wife. The walls are made of unburnt bricks and the roof is thatched. There is a small platform built in front of her house where they can all sit down and relax in the evening. To one side of her kitchen, there is a small thatched enclosure built with coconut palm leaves for the goats. Both of the other two rooms have separate entrances. One enters the kitchen from the bigger room, which is the living room. This room has only one small window overlooking the steep ridge, behind the hut.

Before this particular settlement of huts came into existence some 10 years back, the site on which it is built was waste land belonging to the Government. It was a steep slope

full of bushes and trees. Like the other first settlers, Jayamma's husband and sons cleared the land and carved out a house site for themselves. The particular row of houses, of which Jayamma's is one, is a narrow ribbon-like stretch of land touching the top of the slope, barely wide enough for a hut. Actually, from Jayamma's back window all that you see is a steep slope with huts precariously perched here and there, giving one the feeling that they might get washed down any time in heavy rain. However, the window also commands a fantastic distant view, looking on to a lake and a vast stretch of green.

Jayamma had to move into this settlement 10 years back when she was evicted from a similar settlement in an area which now comes within the city limits of Trivandrum. She and her children were working for brick kilns in that vicinity and decided to move here as this too was Government land and had a number of brick kilns close by. All Jayamma's family works for the kilns except her husband. Her eldest son, however, stayed behind near the old settlement to work for the old brick kiln where they all were working before. He was already married and wanted, by then, to set up a separate house with his wife.

The husband

Jayamma is really the head of the household though her husband, Kanan, is very much there. Kanan gave up work for good, some 5 years back. He spends his time now tending three goats (a mother and two kids) and looking after the house. When Kanan retired, his union paid him some sort of gratuity. Out of that money he had bought a female goat for Rs.150. This goat got two kids. After it went dry, Kanan sold it for Rs.110 and bought another goat, ready to deliver within a month or so for Rs.150. Kanan kept the kids, however, so that once they are grown up, each of them will fetch a full price.

Kanan spends most of his time now taking the goats grazing in the ravine at the foot of the slope and collecting grass and leaves for them to eat. His other two companions during the day are a cat and a dog, which are kept as household pets. The cat keeps track of the rats and the dog guards the house when Kanan is out grazing the goats. Being a man, he does not, nor is he expected to, help Jayamma with any of the female-typed tasks like carrying water, sweeping the house or cooking, though he has plenty of time and even energy. Kanan does frequently serve as a baby sitter not only for his married daughters living in the same settlement but also for other Ezhava neighbours. Though there are people from all castes living in the settlement, the Ezhava families tend to stick together.

Kanan once was a boatman transporting coconut husks, taking them through the backwaters,[3] but now he feels too old and his eyesight is weak. Boatmen who transport coir husks have very often spend nights on the boat, taking a load of husks to its proper destination for retting. It is a strenuous kind of work involving long hours at a stretch, but lasts only a few days a week. Kanan depends completely on Jayamma for his survival except that when his goat gave milk he sold it to the tea shop and bought with that money beedies to smoke and tea to drink.

The children

None of Jayamma's six children went to school. She has trained them all as brick workers, taking them along with her to work as they grew up. The brick industry is one where people of practically all ages can work. In a way, it is a temptation for parents to send children there, instead of to school, to earn a living. Since the wages are paid according to the quantum of work done, all have a chance to perform and earn according to

their respective abilities.

Jayamma would have very much liked her youngest son, Anant, to go to school. Actually, she could have spared him for when it was his turn to go to school there were at least two or three earning members in the family. Earlier, Jayamma could not afford the luxury of sparing any of her children for school. She needed all the help she could get to make both ends meet. Unfortunately, Anant was not at all interested in school and prefered always to go along with his mother to the work site.

The morning routine

Jayamma's work starts early in the morning at seven O' clock. In order to present herself at the work site at that early hour, she has to get up at about five in the morning. She usually times this by the early morning plane that comes in from Madras to Trivandrum. She is the first one in the house to wake up and her first task is to go and fetch two pots of water. She has to get on to the main road and walk about a furlong to do this. For some time, the public water tap was disconnected as there were complaints against the squatter households bathing on the roadside. This is usually forbidden but it is seldom that municipal authorities go to the extent of cutting off the water supply. After the tap was disconnected an unauthorised dent was made in the main pipe and water had to be collected with the help of small tin cans. Jayamma, and also other women of the settlement, had to spend thrice the amount of time they normally spent and never had the satisfaction of getting clean drinking water. There was nothing that she or the other residents of the settlement thought they could do to get the water connection restored. They have such a low status in the eyes of not only all and sundry but also themselves that they had no courage to take up the issue with the concerned authority. Since this was the only public

water tap servicing more than forty households, all of them were put to considerable hardship. Luckily, after about six months the water connection was restored. So Jayamma's first task in the morning has been made much easier.

Once she has brought the morning supply of water, she sweeps her front yard and kitchen and then goes down to the ravine for her toilet. The ravine has been divided into two parts, one used exclusively by women and the other by men. Thus both the sexes have some privacy and have no fear of running into each other.

It is too early in the day for her to have a bath. Moreover, she doesn't have time for it. Anyway, once she comes back from work, she needs the bath badly as she is usually covered with mud and sweat. So she has only a small wash in the morning near the banana tree at the back of her house. She combs her hair in front of a small mirror and goes to the tea shop in the settlement itself to have a cup of hot sugary tea mixed with milk. Practically everyone in the settlement, men and women, stops for tea at the tea shop on the way to work. Jayamma has an added reason. Her youngest son, Anant, loves to eat plain sugar once he knows it is there so that she can never find any for her tea at home.

The Nature of her Work

Jayamma's work site is about three furlongs from the squatter colony. Though there are a couple of other brick kilns, she and her family have always worked for the kiln belonging to an ex-military sergeant (known as havildar in India) ever since she came to this settlement. She feels that it is better to work for the same brick kiln. Then she can not only be sure of work but also expect to get a small loan in an hour of crisis. Also, her children are assured of employment.

On a clear day when the sun is bright, she is sure to get work. However, as a routine she will first present herself to the kiln owner and then start work. The place, where the bricks are moulded and dried, is usually a 10-minute walk from the brick kiln. Jayamma has to go there to start her work. She carries a small piece of old towel to be twisted into a coil on top of her head on which to rest a wooden plank, two feet x eight inches. The plank is used as a base on which the bricks can be placed. An adult woman carries 20 bricks at a time. She herself has to stack the bricks on the plank on her head while standing. The technique of doing it is first to stack the bricks two at a time, starting from the centre of the plank, and then to place one brick each time, on either side of this pile. Once twenty bricks are stacked in this fashion she starts walking with a swinging rhythm, supporting the bricks with one hand and using the other hand for balance. She has to walk fast, virtually run, in order to dispose of the load quickly. When she reaches the brick kiln, a man will be standing there to receive and stack the bricks she carries. He cannot help her unload the bricks as she would lose the balance. The danger is two-fold; the bricks may fall and break, or she may sprain her neck in the process. Actually, the main brunt of this weight carrying falls on her neck. So Jayamma unloads the bricks herself, two at a time from the sides, handing them over to the waiting man. Thus the whole operation of loading, transporting and unloading falls on her. The man helps her only at the final stage.

Daily wages

Whatever be the number of bricks she has carried, which usually varies between 500 to 700 per day, Jayamma's wages are never more than 5 rupees. The number that she carries in a day depends on the distance she has to cover. Her wage depends on

both the distance she covers and the number of bricks she carts in the course of the day.

Jayamma has been doing the same job for the last thirty years. The day she was strong enough to cart twenty bricks on her head she had reached the ceiling. Now she cannot aspire or hope towards any improvement in her work or her earnings. Occasionally, the men may ask her to join them in stacking bricks in the kiln for firing. This needs some extra skill. Two bricks are lightly tapped and thrown a few feet to the next man who in turn throws them to another man till they reach their final destination for stacking. The brick kilns are about twenty feet high and men usually form a conveyor belt to stack bricks. Doing this male work, however, does not bring Jayamma any extra remuneration except for the recognition it confers on her as an experienced hand.

Sex typing of work

In the brick industry there is a very rigid compartmentalisation of work on the basis of sex. Women are used here exclusively for the unskilled job of carrying head loads. If they are not carrying bricks they are carrying clay, but they do not have access to any of the other jobs, such as moulding, shaping, stacking and arranging in the kiln.[4/] These are all exclusively male jobs. Moreover, as we shall see, all these other jobs carry much higher wages, some nearly twice as much as women get for the load carrying jobs they do. The work that men do is also more interesting without always being physically more exhausting.

Compared to the woman brick worker's daily wage of four and a half to five rupees the women construction workers, who too are usually confined to carrying head loads from one place to another, get seven rupees by way of daily wage. So even compared

to women workers doing similar work elsewhere those engaged in carting bricks are at a disadvantage regarding their daily earnings.

Since no kiln employs more than 20 persons at any one time, the whole industry belongs to the unorganised sector. Brick making is therefore considered a cottage industry. The workers, female as well as male, do not belong to any trade union. But, as we shall see, women are the more exploited ones. They hang on to their job however, because of (a) the uncertainty of work opportunity elsewhere, say in construction and (b) the continuity brick work offers in terms of employment.

Operations in brick-making

Brick moulding is usually undertaken after paddy has been harvested. It is done in the fields where the soil is clayey. Trivandrum, Quilon, Ernakulam and Trichur districts of Kerala are supposed to have the best clay i.e. the clay particularly suited for this industry, but brick kilns are spread all over the State.[2/] You find, in between the paddy fields, many patches where land is left fallow and brick making takes place. It is common for cultivators to lease out their paddy land for brick making once in every two or three years. Usually, land is given on lease for six months after harvesting. The idea is to get thereby the level of the land lowered somewhat so that (a) it can be terraced and water can flow from other parts more easily and (b) the top soil is removed and fresh soil from elsewhere mixed with manure can be put in its place.

Once a brick maker has taken a piece of land on lease the going rate around Trivandrum (in 1976-77) has been around Rs.1300 for the entire six months for 20 cents of paddy land- water is let into the patch to flood it for some days. Then the soil is dug up and kneaded into a clayey consistency. The brick workers

are supposed to dig only two feet deep. Dug thus, a twenty-cent piece[6] yields enough clay for 2,00,000 bricks. Usually, the soil is dug up in patches of four feet by four feet by two feet. Two men dig out the mud with a shovel and knead it thoroughly with their feet. They know by experience when the soil has reached proper consistency for the purpose of moulding. If it is not raining, they make small clay mounds very near the place where they are kneading.

Each clay mound is three feet in height and diameter. Once clay is heaped to the required height and diameter, the outer edges of the mound are nicely smoothened and covered with coconut palm leaves which are supposed to shield it from the sun. In this way, the clay loses some of its moisture without forming a crust or cracking and remains soft to the touch. The mound has to be left like this for three days. After three days, the clay has just enough moisture to be shaped into a brick when pressed into the mould. The men who knead and heap the clay make about nine rupees a day, on a piece-rate basis. But the job these men do is, no doubt, both strenuous and messy. They have to be knee deep in slush, constantly stamping away for eight hours with only small breaks.

Sometimes when it is raining, or threatens to rain, the kneaded mound has to be transported to an elevated site near the kiln itself so that the rain will not harm it.[7] Then the moulding is done near the kiln. Usually this need arises during the monsoon season when brick moulding takes place intermittently. This task of transporting clay to the kiln site again is delegated to female workers. Moving a mound of clay carries a wage of Rs.12 irrespective of the distance and number of women working on the job.

A mound of clay yields 1300 bricks and at least two mounds

must be transferred to keep a team of three men occupied in moulding for a day. When five women workers transfer two mounds a day they together can make Rs.24. When Jayamma has to cart clay she shares the work with her daughters and friends. The job is divided in such a way that one woman scoops out the mud with a ply plank and loads it on the other's heads. This is a messy job, though slightly more paying, but it is only done during the rains. Brick kiln owners themselves usually avoid this. They do not find it economical in comparison to transportation of bricks. Moreover, space around the kiln can be a major constraint to undertaking moulding of bricks there.

A normal-sized brick kiln around Trivandrum, with a thatched shed which has to be re-built every year, takes in around 75,000 dried bricks at time. One moulding team of three men consisting of a mistry and two helpers, can turn out about 2600 bricks a day. Thus it takes roughly a month to feed the kiln which is fired once every month, except during the rainy season. Usually the same team of three, i.e. the moulder and his two helpers, also undertake the firing of the kiln after the bricks have been set in.

Thus, with three men employed on moulding, two men in the field digging and kneading clay, five to six women carting bricks, and two men unloading and stacking bricks at the kiln, each kiln of an average size in Trivandrum district can be said to employ regularly 12 - 13 persons a day. In the monsoon months, however, firing does not take place every month. On an average, a kiln is fired 10 times in a year. Naturally, therefore in the monsoon months the work, be it moulding, transporting or stacking, gets staggered. Therefore, in those months the employment opportunities are less.

Current wage differentials

The mistry in the moulding team makes the highest piece-rate wage of around Rs.12 a day; his two helpers come next with Rs.10 a day. The kneading of the clay, though strenuous, does not carry high wages. The men engaged in kneading, as already stated, make nine rupees per day. The men engaged in stacking bricks at the kiln make more than Rs.10 a day. As for the women who only cart bricks or clay, they never make more than five rupees a day.[8/]

Jayamma's two sons have, luckily, graduated to the position of moulding assistants and therefore make about Rs.10 a day. Her eldest son helps with moulding for a brick kiln where Jayamma herself worked several years back. Her second son does similar work for the kiln where she is now working.

Her three daughters, two married and one still unmarried, also work for the same kiln, but being women, cannot aspire to do anything better than head load carrying. So while her sons make Rs.10 a day each, Jayamma and her daughters make between Rs.4.50 and Rs.5.00 every day they are on the job.

Daily shopping

Jayamma does her shopping every day on her way back from work. She buys only fish, vegetables and spices at the evening bazar held near the squatter settlement. These together cost her, on average, one and a half rupees. Her neighbour, who is a tapioca vendor, delivers tapioca at home. Kanan is there to collect it. Jayamma herself does not buy soap or oil. The earning children must do that out of their wages, for each gives to the mother only between one and two rupees in cash. Most of the rest of what each earns is spent on tea/coffee, breakfast and lunch. Since Jayamma buys only tea and tiffin, she herself does not spend more than one rupee on eating out. But she is

a pan addict and that means 50 paise every day. So she herself comes back home from work with a cash amount of three rupees. With half of that accounted for by fish vegetables and spices, the balance left after paying the tapioca vendor for the two kilos of tapioca she has a standing order to supply is always less than one rupee.

Jayamma has always bought her rice from the ration (fair-price) shop. She does not buy any wheat whatsoever and surrenders her sugar entitlement in favour of the grocer who is always ready to buy sugar from her at 50 paise below the ruling retail price per kilo. It is important to note that Jayamma can buy her rice ration out of the money which her earning children give her every day because, as has been noted above, her own take-home wage is enough only to buy tapioca, fish, vegetables and spices.

Though her two younger children do not contribute to the mother's pool of daily cash more than the very minimum, largely because of the widespread practice of eating out, their contribution has been adequate, so far at least, to enable Jayamma to avail herself of the ration rice entitlement. Indeed Jayamma, unlike several neighbours of hers, has never pawned off her ration card, not even to raise money once every two years to replace her thatched roof.

The major meal

In Jayamma's house, there has all along been only one major meal, which is cooked by her in the afternoon after she gets back from work. Since the household consists of virtually all adults and earning members the system, works out reasonably well, at least at present. Practically, everyone has his/her tea, breakfast and lunch at the wayside eating places. There are plenty of such places to go to. The result is that everyone spends a major portion of her/his wage on eating out. Jayamma is the one who

usually spends the minimum eating out. But the younger members of her family are not that careful in spending. Kanan, who stays behind, goes to the teashop in the squatter settlement for tea and shares whatever rice gruel is left over from the previous night with Anant, the younger son, if he hasn't found some work. The day Anant gets work, he eats his lunch and tiffin out. Since Kanan must have his tea everyday at the tea shop and his quota of beedies, he needs about one rupee a day for his pocket money. When the goat was giving milk, he sold it to the tea shop and was nearly self sufficient. Sukumaran, the second son, has so far always made up whatever is his father's daily deficit which may range from 25 paise to one full rupee.

The early life

Jayamma has virtually grown up around the brick kilns. Her parents died when she was very young and she was raised by her mother's sister who was also a brick worker. Her father was a landless labourer attached to a big landlord and her mother, while she was alive, eked out a livelihood as a vegetable vendor. Even when Jayamma was nine or 10 years old she would often go to the paddy fields to cart a few extra bricks for her aunt. As was stated above, brick carting is done by people of all ages. Young children carry just as much as their tender heads can hold and try to earn some money for their parents. Her aunt got Jayamma married at the age of 16 to Kanan, an Ezhava boatman from a nearby village. Jayamma moved to her husband's house and stayed home without working, but only for a year. The very next year, Kanan got an offer to work as a coolie for the army. He went all the way to distant Assam and Jayamma was left to fend for herself. So she started working for the brick kilns, the job she was familiar with, and came back from her husband's village to live near her aunt.

Husband's work

Traditionally, the Ezhava community has always been closely associated with the coconut and palm culture. They have been the traditional toddy tappers. Also, they are known to do all jobs which have generally anything to do with coconut cultivation and use, including transportation of coir husks and coir making. After he came back from his brief interlude with the army, Kanan went back to his old job as a boatman, transporting coir husks through the back waters. But he himself never owned a boat. The coir husks were collected from different places and then loaded on to a country craft. A boat of this kind can carry about 75,000 husks. Kanan used to ply the boat between Pachallur and Aakulam, some 20 kilometres apart. Usually, he worked in a team of three men. It took a long while to manouvre the boat with the help of a pole, as in some parts the back waters are not only not deep but also densely covered with water hyacinth, the African payal.[9/] It took them 24 hours to reach the destination. Together, the men got 20 rupees for every trip, but their intransit expenses were also quite high. Being a strenuous job, lasting long hours, in damp surroundings, a good portion of wage was spent on food and drink. The men who worked on this job were almost all given to liquor. Kanan too spent a good part of his earnings and by the time he came home he could give Jayamma hardly three to four rupees. This was just enough only to take care of feeding Kanan for the rest of the week. The rest of the family had therefore to be provided out of whatever Jayamma and her children earned from carrying bricks.

Bringing up children

Jayamma's earnings were always so important to the family that she had to work till the last day of her several confinements. She delivered all her children at home with the help of a mid-wife and her aunts. Jayamma feels that she didn't have

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much of a problem working till the last day and her deliveries were easy since her body and muscles were all supple. She remembers staying in the house after delivery for only a month and then getting back to work leaving the baby either at the neighbour's or with a relative. As her children grew up, she decided against sending them to school and started taking them with her for work. She felt that it was no use sending them to school just for a short while as they would anyway not get any better job with just a little bit of education.

The first son

When her first son became a helper to a mistry, Jayamma got him married the moment she goat an offer from one of her caste group. They got some two tolas (i.e. about 23 grams) of gold and some Rs.300 in dowry.[10] This was the first time in her life she had some money to spend. Within a year however, the son and his wife decided to set up a separate establishment and Jayamma could not do anything about it. After all, the son was economically independent.

The first daughter

Two of her daughters, Suvarna and Shamala were now going to work with her. Though Jayamma had taken some dowry for her son's marriage, she had not, and could not, make any provision for her daughters' marriages. She knew however that no match could be arranged for the girls without exchange of dowry. So she just waited and hoped for the best. Both the daughters were very good looking however; so she thought something would turn up one day. Her only wish was that they should get married to Ezhava boys.

Very soon an Ezhava boy, Ravindran, paid attention to Suvarna and she decided to go and stay with him. Ravindran,

however, was only a casual laborer and was already a drink addict. Jayamma didn't quite like the match therefore, but had nothing to say as she had no alternative to offer. Then one day some two years after Suvarna started living with him, Ravindran fell down while riding a rented cycle and broke his arm. He went to the nearby public hospital and got it fixed but somehow the fracture was not attended to properly and to this day he has the full use of only one hand. So he has been a drag on Suvarna ever since. Quite often, however, he goes away from the house to stay for days on end with his own mother. So far he has always come back. Suvarna is happy whenever he comes back, becuase she feels it is better to have a man around the house than none. Thus Suvarna had to take over the full responsibility of running the house pretty soon and had two children, a son and a daughter, to look after as well.

When Jayamma moved over to the present settlement nine or 10 years back she asked her daughter, Suvarna, also to move and be near her. With her husband already dependent, Suvarna needed both the moral and physical support of her own family. Her father and brothers cleared another two cents of land towards the foot of the same hill for a hut and moved Suvarna and her family there.

Within two years of the move, Ravindran decided to undergo vasectomy. Suvarna needed money to re-do her roof which was in poor shape. The thatched roofs need to be done every two years, on average, and this can be a major expense for a low income household. To get money for re-oding the roof, the choice was between 'mortgaging' the ration card or one of them going to the family planning clinic where he or she would get paid for undergoing the operation. Since they already had two children, one son and one daughter, Ravindran decided to undergo vasectomy and make a contribution. This happened also to be the time when a major vasectomy camp was organised in Trivandrum.[11] Unfortunately, after that their son got jaundice and died. So they are left with

one child only, a daughter. She has studied upto the fifth class, and is the first literate person in Jayamma's family. But now she is going to work at the brick kiln with her mother to supplement the family income.

Recently, when her house roof gave away again during the rains Suvarna had to come to her mother Jayamma for shelter in her house. Suvarna cooked separately for herself and her daughter in the goat shed but slept with her parents in their room. Ravindran went away to his mother. Eventually, when they can collect some money to buy the materials, Suvarna's father, and her second brother will rebuild her roof. Ravindran too will probably turn up to lend some help in manual work.

The second daughter

Jayamma's second daughter, Shamala, has been a great help to her mother. She would go with her to the brick kiln and a good part of her wage went to the family. Actually, it was with the help of Shamala's and Sukumaran's wages that Jayamma could build all her house with unburnt bricks and even put in doors and windows. But this could not last for all time to come. Shamala is extremely good looking, by any standard. So young men, in and around the settlement, were always hovering around her. Between working for brick kilns and at building sites, Shamala always preferred the latter as the work there is better paid. But apart from construction work being seasonal, it is difficult to get regular job there unless one is close to a mistry. Some years back, Shamala was working at a construction site where her mother's cousin's son also had a job. They got to know each other intimately. Among the Pahayas, however, such an alliance is not considered suitable. The boy's parents, in particular, disapproved of the growing relationship between him and Shamala. The young people decided all the same to go ahead and set up a house of their own and started living together. Shamala had a small gold chain

which she sold off to put up their hut. Unfortunately, the arrangement did not work for long. The boy was always suspicious of other worker's intentions about Shamala and also was uncertain whether Shamala was interested in other young men. So there were often quarrels between the two and Shamala was back home with Jayamma, her mother, within a year. According to her mother men who work for the construction industry, like taxi drivers, cannot be trusted with girls, for they are apt to change their women on the slightest pretext.

After a lapse of two years, Shamala fell in love with a Pulaya,[12] low caste boy, Suren. His family also lived in the same settlement. Jayamma knew of the budding romance but was hoping that it would eventually fade out. He was younger than Shamala by about five years. His widowed mother was a poor agricultural labourer and he had two younger brothers to look after. The other people in the colony felt however, that Jayamma was encouraging the romance. At least, she did not put her foot down to stop it. Anyway, one fine day, Shamala decided to elope with Suren. Now Shamala and Suren live in the same settlement in Suren's mother's hut. When Shamala had a baby boy, she would leave it with her father, Kanan, while she was at work. Jayamma had a small cloth cradle made for the infant and it was hung up in her living room. Indeed, the child is now really a part of Jayamma's house.

Though Suren finds work off and on and brings in some money, his responsibility is great. His mother doesn't make much money. His two younger brothers are still going to school. There was a short period when no one in Suren's house had work except Shamala who was going to the brick kiln. Shamala resented however sharing her wages with Suren's family and started cooking separately in the same hut.

When the roof of their hut collapsed recently the two

separated families had to live right there with some make shift shelter. Unlike Suvarna, Shamala does not have access to her mother's house in such circumstances, certainly not along with her husband, for she is below her caste.

The second son's marriage

The person who was until very recently a real help to Jayamma was Sukumaran, her second son. He earned ten rupees a day and contributed a good part of his earnings to the family. He had no vices. Jayamma liked having him work for the same kiln. This meant a lot of respect for her and the other workers were scared of treating her roughly lest Sukumaran picked up a quarrel with them on that score.

Though Sukumaran was only twenty two years old, a good offer came for his marriage. The girl's party was willing to give a dowry of one thousand rupees and two tolas of gold. Also, the girl would have in her name some 25 cents of garden land i.e. land on which tapioca and coconut, but not paddy, can be grown, in a village called Attapara only 10 kilometres away. The girl was literate, having attended school for five years, and good looking. Kanan, Jayamma and the rest of the family went with Sukumaran to visit the girl's family and the marriage was agreed upon.

The date was to be fixed for the earliest auspicious period for marriage. Jayamma and Kanan were very excited about the offer of dowry and did not want to take any chances lest Sukumaran might decide to marry of his own accord. Given the type of neighbourhood in which they were living, this sort of thing could happen any day. Not only would Jayamma then have to put up with any sort of girl but also lose all chance of a dowry. In the settlement, though the common law type of marriage (i.e. living together as husband and wife by mutual consent without any formal contract sanctioned by law or religion) is severely looked down upon, it has been quite

the order of the day. Both Suvarna and Shamala had this type of marriage. Why expose Sukumaran to the same danger? A dowry marriage was a real prestigious affair. In this particular case, the girl's party was better placed than the boy's party since the girl's three brothers were masons, though she had lost her father.

Jayamma's first job was to go and get a horoscope cast for her son. They got hold of an Ezhava pundit and paid him Rs.14 to cast Sukumaran's horoscope. The pundit also matched the horoscope with the girl's and found that the earliest auspicious day for their marriage was the day of Onam[13] in 1976. They had to pay him another five rupees for this. After all, this was a proper marriage, which would give the family a lot of prestige in the neighbourhood; hence these expenses had to be incurred.

Once the marriage arrangements were finalised, Sukumaran collected the cash from the girl's party in three instalments. With the first instalment of Rs.300, Sukumaran brought two nylon sarees, with bluses and petticoats to match, two lungis and two towels, all for the bride. He also bought a small box, the first of its kind in their home, to keep the clothes. Ordinarily, they hung all their clothes on a clothes line strung between the two walls.

Sukumaran bought for himself one new lungi and two new shirts. Also, he bought a set of new clothese for his parents, his unmarried sister and younger brother. He bought all these clothes from the same shop after he collected some more cash from the girl's party. By the time everyone in the family had new clothes, he had spent some Rs.500.

Suvarna, the eldest daughter, went to the city market and did all the grocery and vegetable shopping. A nearby bakery and the local tea shop were asked to supply cakes, banana chips and coffee. Women from the neighbouring households were mobilised to

help make idlies (steamed rice cakes) for the marriage feast.

The marriage took place on the Onam day in a temple about two kilometres away from the squatter settlement. Sukumaran went with his father and 21 others, not counting his younger sister and brother, by bus to the temple. These 21 others were mostly relatives from his father's and mother's side and their families. There were also close friends and Ezhava neighbours from the squatter settlement. Jayamma herself and her married daughters were not supposed to go with the marriage party. So they stayed behind. The time chosen by their horoscope man was two O' clock in the afternoon. So the marriage party reached there a little before that. The girl's party was there already. The wedding ceremony took only 15 minutes. Thereafter, a small feast was held at the temple itself by the girl's party. After that the marriage party returned with the bride, Sujatha, in three taxi-loads to the squatter settlement.

Jayamma was ready with her eldest daughter, Suvarna, and her close friends to welcome the bride. A brass oil lamp, which too was bought with the dowry money, was lit for the purpose. Shamala, the second daughter, had to be kept away from the reception ceremony because she had married out of caste. She could join them later however for the feast once the ceremonies were over.

As the guests arrived, every female guest admired the clothese and jewellery the bride wore. They were all excited and happy. Jayamma would repeatedly tell all the guests that now it was the turn of her son and daughter-in-law to look after her. She had become too old to work any more. This probably was her way of preparing them for the future when she would retire from work and depend on them. She would also add that she had chosen the bride from a modest house so that she would be humble, though she knew very well that Sujatha's family was economically much

better off than her own. This probably was her way of putting the daughter-in-law on notice that she had to be humble.

For a week after the wedding, the house was full of people, visiting and congratualting Jayamma. Sukumaran and Sujatha used the smaller of the two rooms in the house and the rest of the family shared the living room. No one from Jayamma's house went to work. Anyway, the brick kiln itself was closed for more than a fortnight because of rain. Then Jayamma got ill from over-exhaustion. So Sukumaran bought her a few aspirins. He knew that these relieve some pain but Jayamma's body ached and the fever would not go. It was some sort of flu. For nearly a fortnight, the six people in the house were living on the left over dowry money. The two married daughters and their children were also present most of the waking hours. Then, because of a spell of heavy rains soon after Sukumaran's marriage, Suvarna's roof gave way and she along with her daughter had to be accommodated by Jayamma. It was not for nothing, therefore, that Sukumaran, the newly married son, began showing signs of irritation with the house and the people living therein.

Jayamma's illness

Jayamma was aware of the tension that was building up in the house. She moved out her goats and gave the little, three feet by four feet. goat shed to Suvarna to cook her food separately. Sukumaran started going to work but whatever he brought home was not enough. Day by day, he started giving less money to the family. Vanaja, the unmarried daughter, also resumed going to work. But Jayamma felt weaker every day.

Jayamma's flu showed no signs of leaving her. So she went to the nearby Medical College Hospital. She had to take her ration card for identification and wait in a long queue. They finally examined her and gave her an injection and a prescription for

medicines to buy. Jayamma was however not happy with the way the doctor disposed of her. She was sore also at the long time it took the doctor to see her. So she did not buy the medicines and refused to go for further injections. Instead, she went to a nearby clinic run by a church school. She felt she got better attention there, but it did not really put her back on her feet. Finally, she went to the Government Ayurvedic Clinic and only then did she start feeling better.[14/]

When Jayamma was ill, she almost felt like giving up work altogether. She felt that the work at the kiln was too hard. Her body ached for rest. She very much wanted to retire. But when she saw the tension building up at home she thought it was better for her to go to work somehow. Even before Jayamma could do this, Sukumaran and Sujatha went away for a while to stay with the latter's family.

Ostensibly, Sukumaran wanted to have a look at the land which was in Sujatha's name. Sujatha too was happy to go back to her mother after a month and a half with her in-laws. Once they went, it took them over a month to come back. Sukumaran decided to plant tapioca on Sujatha's land. Also, his mother-in-law's roof needed replacing. So he pawned Sujatha's gold bangles with the bank for a loan of Rs.400. He lent his mother-in-law Rs.150 to re-do her roof and spent the rest on planting tapioca with the help of two other men.

In the meantime, the family at Jayamma's house had to manage with only Vanaja's daily earning. That hastened Jayamma's decision to go back to work. She thought she could start by carting smaller loads of, say, 250 bricks at a time. Having mentally reconciled herself to the idea that she could not stop working, she soon started to feel better. Onam, 1977, is already past and Jayamma has been fully at work for over a year since Sukumaran's marriage.

When Sukumaran and Sujatha came back after six weeks, Sujatha was expecting a child. Sukumaran had come back determined not to contribute to the daily family pool of cash more than three rupees. Before his marriage, he gave five to six rupees daily. Naturally, there were constant arguments. Finally, Jayamma told Sujatha, in a huff, to cook separately if she wanted. That was what Sujatha and Sukumaran wanted but had not been bold enough to suggest to her. They started using the goat shed as their kitchen. The news of separation of the kitchen spread like wild fire in the neighbourhood.

The seeds for the eventual complete separation of Sukumaran from his mother had thus been sown. Luckily, the [illegible]ation with the village office for the allotment of land on which she is squatting with her family is in Jayamma's own name. If ever it is alloted, the land will therefore belong to her, and not to Sukumaran, who must eventually move out.

Jayamma knows she has nearly lost Sukumaran. She will soon lose Vanaja, her unmarried daughter, because she is bound to go off with some boy or other, the same way that her elder sisters went off. Jayamma still has one more son to hold on to. Though she has gone back to work, she has not given up hope that some day she can stop work and some one will look after her and her ageing husband.

The death of the goat

Kanan too was so involved with the quarrels going on in the house after Sukumaran's wedding that one day he forgot to check on his pregnant goat at lunch time. He had taken her down the slope to graze early in the morning and had tied her near Suvarna's house at the foot of the ridge. The goat was tied up with just a two-ply coir rope which it snapped. It appears that wandering around, it must have found a whole lot of tapioca peels and eaten some. But tapioca peels are poisonous and make the animals giddy.[15] By th

evening, the goat was ill and bleating in pain. When the message reached them, Jayamma and Kanan immediately rushed down to see what had gone wrong. Their first suspicion was foul play. Jayamma even suspected for a moment that Sujatha, her own daughter-in-law, might have, herself or through some lady, done some black magic on the goat. Luckily, the goat still had some small pieces of tapioca skin in its mouth and that should have dispelled all such doubts. Still, while they immediately tried to get some local herb medicines, they also looked for the squatter washer woman to remove any possible spell. Every neighbour who came to watch had his or her own remedy to recommend. Jayamma ended up spending some three rupees, desperately trying to save the animal. But it was too late. When the goat died, it was left to Kanan to handle the corpse.

Naturally, Kanan's immediate concern was to recover as much money as possible. He asked his Paraiah[16] neighbour, a professional butcher, to cut up the goat. He demanded in return, not only the usual one kilo of meat but also the goat skin, knowing that it was too late in the evening for Kanan to get anyone else to do the job for him. The goat skin, if properly removed, usually fetched around 20 rupees. Naturally, Kanan refused to part with it for nothing. When the butcher cut up the goat, he cut up the skin so very badly that Kanan could not sell it for a penny. He could only sell the goat meat to the neighbours but that too at half the market price and recovered only around 20 rupees.

The loss of the goat was a major set back, particularly for Kanan. As was mentioned earlier, Kanan had bought the goat for Rs.150. It was already pregnant. Kanan was hoping that it would not only start giving milk soon but also deliver a couple of kids that he could bring up. Already, he had two young goats from his earlier goat. Eventually, he hoped to get together enough money to buy a cow for the household. Only two other households in this squatter settlement of 42 have cows. All his plans were now dashed.

Jayamma was sad too not only because the goat was so close to Kanan's heart but also because it made Kanan feel useful. Kanan was able to buy his beedies and an occasional cup of tea at the nearby shop with the money he made from the goat's milk. Now Kanan was left with only two young goats to tend. If nothing happens to them, he should be able to sell them for Rs.150 each in about a year. But that sum will not be enough to buy a good cow for his family.

With Sujatha cooking separately and Kanan's goat deed, the year beginning with Onam of 1976 did not turn out to be as good as Jayamma expected. In fact, by the middle of the year the prospect looked grimmer particularly when Jayamma allowed herself to think of her old age and of the days when she won't be able to go to work any longer and both Kanan and herself would have to depend on someone else completely for their maintenance.

Propitiating the goddess

It was the month of March 1977 and the nearby Devi[17] temple was being got ready for its annual celebrations which are timed, more or less, with the harvesting of the winter (mundakan) paddy crop. Jayamma's third son, Anant, wanted to join other children of his age group, 11 to 15, in the ceremonies. On the appointed day, the children roll round the temple deity in a lying down posture. This particular ceremony is called Urul. To do so, Anant would have to prepare himself by going on a completely vegetarian diet for a whole week. Also he was not to eat during that week any food cooked the previous day. Obviously, this meant that he could not eat for breakfast left over rice from the previous night. Jayamma would have to either cook fresh food or give him money to buy his breakfast. Also she must cook a proper vegetarian meal for him in the evening. Ordinarily, she cooked some fish which they all ate with rice and tapioca. Buying vegetables would mean another extra expense. Then a new towel would have to be bought for Anant. Including the sweet rice, ponkala[18] offering at the temple, all told, Anant's participation in Urul would cost [illegible]

at least Rs.25.

On the appointed day Anant had to fast and go without food altogether right from the morning. He was taken to the temple in the afternoon. There, he wrapped himself in the new towel after a dip in the pond near the temple. Then he and other boys were brought ceremoniously to the accompaniment of drums and tom toms. Once the boys reached the temple entrance they were asked to lie flat on the stomach and start rolling round the deity, to the[19] accompaniment of drums. Kanan and Sukumaran helped Anant roll round and round the temple. In about one hour, Anant and all others in his group were in a sort of trance. Rolling round and round on a completely empty stomach to the loud beating of the drums and tom toms, even a well bodied adult would feel dizzy after some time.

Jayamma had taken a vow to cook sweet rice and offer it to the deity. So she was in the temple yard cooking sweet rice in a new mud pot in the company of some 200 other women, all sitting next to each other in a row, each with her own stove, mud pot and cooking ingredients. The Ezhava temple priest came round and sprinkled the holy water on everyone's sweet rice. Jayamma left a portion of her cooked sweet rice for the temple and took the rest home to share with Anant and the family. Kanan and Sukumaran walked Anant back home and gave him first a cold water bath and then coconut water to drink.

Jayamma prayed before the Devi and asked her for the early allotment of the land on which she was squatting. She felt mentally much better thereafter and more reconciled to the family situation as it had evolved during the year. She felt that the extra money she had thus spent on Anant was well worth it.

On the eve of Onam 1977, Jayamma's house had two kitchens, one Sujatha's who now had a two-month old baby girl, and the other Jayamma's own. Sujatha had not gone out for work since she was married. Will

Sukumaran ever ask, or let, her go out for work? Jayamma doesn't know. Probably not, but why should she bother now? Sukumaran doesn't help his mother with any money whatsoever any longer.

The last four

Going by the Census definition of a household comprising only those who share a common kitchen, Jayamma's household consists now of only four members. Kanan, her husband, is the only dependent member. The other three, including Jayamma herself, go out to work as often as possible depending on the availability of work. And since brick kilns, at least in Trivandrum district, work practically all round the year except during South-west monsoon when they go slow, work opportunities are there for 280 days in a year. But the daily wage for women working for the brick kilns is distinctly lower not only in comparison to men working also for the brick kilns but even to women working in the construction industry. The nature of the job women do in construction industry is exactly the same as they do for brick kilns, namely head load carrying. But while working for brick kilns, a women has to work for every paisa because what she collects by way of wage at the end of the day is calculated on the basis of the number of bricks or the basketful of clay she has carried. Still, she never earns more than two-thirds of what she would get in construction. Jayamma knows all this. However, unlike other women including Suvarna, Shamala and Vanaja who do switch over to construction work during its peak when anyone available is taken on, Jayamma sticks to the brick industry. But as she grows older, and therefore, weaker, she will be able to carry less and less bricks in a day. So her daily earnings will decline.

It is this thought or fear of the not-too-distant future which makes Jayamma feel extremely dependent on Anant, the young unmarried son. Anant can, and does, spend the major part of whatever he earns on eating out. Still, when he comes back home he must be attended to most. Jayamma serves him larger quantities of food. He gets more

of rice than tapioca. So, in the distribution of calorie intake within the household, Anant does relatively, the best, even on a day he is not working. Who does worst in this regard? Not Vanaja because she is an earner in her own right and insists that she too must have full freedom to do what she likes with her wage. Not Kanan either, because, after all he is the head of the household. So naturally, it is Jayamma herself who eats more of tapioca than rice, who eats only the left over of fish and who, in the end has a shortfall in calorie intake on both the days she is working and the days she is not working. But the shortfall is greater when she is not working. Will this pattern of her living itself not bring the day, she fears most, closer? "No. This is the only way I can provide for our old age."

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. According to the 1961 Census, which gives figures castewise, Ezhavas comprised 22% of the population of Kerala State. They are, as George Woodcock puts it "the leading caste of all outcastes" See Kerala, A Portrait of the Malabar Coast, Faber and Faber, (1967), p 63.

2. Brick-making is a major cottage industry in Kerala involving making and baking or firing hand moulded bricks. According to one estimate, not less than 1,20,000 workers are engaged in making hand moulded bricks in the State. See Report of the Minimum Wages Committee for Fixation of Minimum Rates of Wages for Employment in Bricks Manufacturers, Trivandrum 1971 p.3. (Hereafter, we refer to it as Report of the Minimum Wages Committee for Bricks).

3. Till the middle of the last century there were no good roads in Kerala State and inland trade was carried on almost entirely in boats by backwaters, rivers and connecting canals. They provided excellent means of transport for conveying the commodities of the interior to the ports and thus contributed to the early economic development of the State. (See V. Nagam Aiya, Travancore State Manual, Trivandrum, 1906, p.155). While the major part of the State's agricultural output is now transported by road and rail, backwaters and connecting rivers and canals are still used extensively for the transportation of coconut husks to the retting centres. (See the profile of Kesari, the Coir Worker in this volume.)

4. See Report of the Minimum Wages Committee for Bricks, op.cit. p.21, for a complete list of the various types of jobs involved in the industry.

5. The districts mentioned in the text are observed to employ the largest number of workers in brick-making industry. See Report of the Minimum Wages Committee for bricks, op.cit. p.3

6. In Kerala, land area is expressed, traditionally, in acres and cents. Thus 20 cents represent one-fifth of an acre.

7. If during drying, even a few drops of rain fall on the brick it has to be wetted and kneaded back to clay and moulding repeated. For this reason, manufacture of country bricks takes place at a very much slower pace during the rainy season.

8. According to the minimum wages fixed in 1971, the differentials between the skilled, semi-skilled and non-skilled workers were to be rather small on the basis of the piece rates recommended by the Minimum Wages Committee. While the daily wage for unskilled work would work out to Rs.3.25, it would be Rs.3.55 for semi-skilled work and Rs.3.85 for skilled work. Evidently, the differentials have become very much wider between unskilled work, which is very largely female, on the one hand and semi skilled and skilled work, which are exclusively a male preserve, on the other.

9. Traction by poles through shallow water has been a primordial means of locomation, but it must be noted that poling involves continuous and hard exertion for the boatmen.

10. Dowry to the bridegroom was in fact absent among Ezhavas in the olden days. Rather, the bridegroom had to give a nominal amount to the girl's father as bride price. But that custom has changed in recent years and dowry is becoming more and more common now even among the low income Ezhavas. See, Census of India, 1961, Vol.VII, Kerala, Village Survey Monograph, Trivandrum District (1963), p 129.

11. The sterilisation programme is far advanced in the State. Of the 26% couples "protected" by the end of 1975-76 by various family planning methods in the State, 92% had undergone sterilisation. See Statistics for Planning, State Bureau of Economics and Statistics Trivandrum 1977, p.249.

12. The Pulayas occupy a very low rank in the social scale. They were considered such a polluting caste that even other polluting castes above them were polluted by them. See V. Nagam Aiya, Travancore State Manual, op.cit. p.407.

13. Onam is the principal festival in Kerala. It falls in mid-September, towards the end of the South west Monsoon. It commemmorates the golden age of the King Mahabali, a legendary ruler of Kerala, who is supposed to revisit his land on this day. The Malabar New Year also starts then.

14. Ayurveda is the name of the indigenous system of medicine dating from remote antiquity and is still quite widely practiced in the State. In 1974-75, there were 65 Ayurveda hospitals and 382 dispensaries in Kerala, in addition to a very large number of private clinics practising the same system. In addition there were 8 hospitals and 113 dispensaries practising Homeopathy. Over and above, these, there were 135 hospitals, 162 public health centres, and 552 dispensaries, all practising modern medicine, with 27,568 beds spread all over the State. See Statistics for Planning, op.cit. pp.245-6.

15. That tapioca skin can be very poisonous is very widely known in Kerala. See Village Survey Monograph, Trivandrum District Op.cit., p.244.

16. Paraiahs comprise the second largest scheduled caste in Kerala, after Pulayas.

17. "Devi, the personification of female energy, is the source of all divine and cosmic evolution. The Devi Mahatmya says that Devi takes three forms, Mahalaxmi, Maha Saraswathi and Maha Kali, representing the Sathvika, Rajasa, and Thamasa attributes or Gunas of Prakriti. In the fierce aspect she is mentioned as presiding over other minor goddesses controlling epidemics, sickness and evil spirits and is worshipped under the names of Mahakali, Chamundi, etc. in accordance with Tanthric rites". See S.T.K. Velu Pillai, Travancore State Manual Trivandrum (1931), p.582.

18. Ponkala is an offering usually made in Bhagavathy temples on the 9th day of the Devi festival. It is prepared in the form of pudding by cooking together, rice, jaggery, coconut shavings and plantain fruit in varying combinations. By the evening almost all the Ponkalas would have been ready when the Melsanthi with Devi's sword goes all over the fields and compounds around the temple, where innumerable ponkalas would have been prepared, bless them by sprinkling holy water and flowers. See Census of India (1961) Vol.VII, Kerala Part VII, B(i), Fairs and Festivals, 1966, p.101.

19. Urul Nercha is done by males of all ages. It starts at about 4 pm. with accompaniments like nagaswaram, drum etc. and continues for one or two hours in the midst of packed crowds. There will be several persons participating in the Urul. Every such person will be flat on the ground and rotate himself sidewise and circumbulate the temple at least thrice. See Fairs and Festivals, op.cit., p.196.

CHAPTER IV

SARA THE FISH VENDOR

Veli is one of some 260 fishing villages on the 540 kilometre-long coast-line of Kerala. The district of Trivandrum, in which Veli falls, has a coast-line of about 78 kilometres with 46 fishing villages. In most fishing villages of Kerala, the houses are found in clusters around the church, mosque or temple, giving one a feeling of intense over-crowding. But Veli is somewhat different in that its 580 houses are spread out along the coast.

Though quite close to Trivandrum city, the village was, until some 15 years back, not connected to the city by a proper road. With the location of the country's major space research centre in its vicinity, there is now a metalled road which passes through Veli village. Also it is now very well connected to the city by a bus service.

The fishing community

Out of 580 households 365 belong to the fishing community which is entirely Roman Catholic. They are known as Latin Christians.[1] They trace their origin as Christians to the Portugese. After Vasco da Gama landed near Calicut in 1498, he was followed by a number of missionaries. St. Francis Xavier was one of these missionaries. He visited the Kerala coastal towns and villages from time to time from 1540 to 1552 [2] and converted several inhabitants into Christians.

The church

The whole fishing community of Veli identifies itself very closely with its church, known as St. Thomas Church, a big granite stone structure, one part of which is almost 400 years old. In

recent years, the church has acquired a special prominence. After a resident doctor living nearby had a vision of St. Anthony one evening, he decided to present a statue of St. Anthony to the Church. This started attracting people from other parts within and outside the district. The belief is that if St. Anthony hears your prayers, he cures you of your disease, however, chronic. So the Church has put up a large shed to accommodate the devotees. This has also become a major source of income for the church. Still the most important source of finance is the kuthaka, paid by the fishing community regularly out of the daily proceeds of its fish catch. The church has, over the years, established a regular system of collecting this contribution and enforcing sanctions against those who default in its payment.[3/]

Sara and her parents

Of these fishermen's households in Veli, there is one to which a 45 - year old female fish vendor, Sara by name, belongs. Like Sara, there are 300 female fish vendors in the village. Easily five feet four inches tall, she holds herself absolutely erect, a habit she must have acquired from years of head-load vending of fish. She is a handsome woman, with a very gentle and affectionate nature. As we shall note later, her gentleness has possibly been a handicap in her dealings with others. She cannot be aggressive in her transactions outside. Nor can she be firm with her husband and children at home.

Sara, her mother and grand mother were all born and raised in Veli village. They were fish vendors, a profession which even Sara's first daughter continues to follow to this day.

Sara's grandmother, her father's mother, it appears from her account, owned here some 15 cents of land. Though she had seven sons and only one daughter she left the house and the land around

it for her daughter. This probably was due to the hang-over of the matrilineal sentiment of their Hindu past. While the other six sons moved away after marriage, Sara's father, Anthony, had no place to move to as he married into a very poor family. So his sister let Anthony put up a small hut and stay on her land. This is the hut in which Sara grew up.

Sara never attended school, though there was a lower primary school, run by the Church. Sara, being the eldest of her parent's six children, was needed at home to help her mother with household chores from the age of six. But none of the other children who were relatively free went to school either.

Sara's mother, Annamma, was also a fish vendor and her father, Anthony was a fisherman. Anthony had a catamaran[4] of his own. Sara's mother, Annamma, took part of the fish caught by Anthony to the main fish market in the city to sell. Annamma used to walk this distance, going cross-country through the paddy fields, carrying her basket full of fish on her head, covering a stretch of 15 kilometres either way.

They had six children in all, two girls and four boys. Annamma never went to the hospital and delivered all her children in the hut with the help of the village midwife and relatives. While both her daughters survived, two out of her four sons died as infants.

Though Annamma had to work hard because the family was poor, things were never too bad as long as Anthony was going to the sea to catch fish. But then he fell sick. He caught some respiratory infection and started staying behind at home, even before any of his sons were grown up enough to go out to the sea. So he started making cotton fishing nets at home on order, and making a living thereby.[5]

After Anthony gave up fishing, the major responsibility of raising the family fell on Annamma who continued to vend fish, which she bought from other fishermen on the shore.

But Annamma did not live long. She died at the age of 36, after a very brief illness. The whole responsibility of the house fell thereafter on Sara and her father. Now Sara had to go and sell fish while her sister, Mary, looked after the house. Anthony continued to make some income, making and selling nets. Sara's two brothers, Samuel and Austin, were too young to start working.

Her wedding

Anthony was never in the best of health now. So as Sara grew up, he became more and more anxious that she should be married off, while he was still alive. He felt that this way she would be in a better position to take care of her sister and brothers. He went round and asked all his friends and relatives to help him find a proper match for Sara. The community, according to Sara, got together and raised a sum of Rs.300, found a young man, 24 years old, from a neighbouring village, and got Sara married in the village church. The money was a gift from the community, except that, when a similar occasion arose in one of the donor families, Sara was supposed to make a contribution.

Jose, the bridegroom, was from a nearby village called Kopil. To this day he is referred to as Kopil Jose. He knew how to read and write, having attended school for about four years. But he was a very poor fisherman, as he did not own any catamaran. A fisherman without a boat, however small, of his own is often referred to as the coolie fisherman.

After her marriage to Jose Sara moved to his house in Kopil. She took along with her the younger of her two brothers, Austin, who was only eight years old. However, she did not stay in Kopil

very long. Firstly, as she herself recalls it, she was constantly worried about her family, particularly her ailing father. Secondly, Jose's father was somewhat mentally unbalanced and his house was far from a pleasant place to live in.

The husband's parents

Jose's story is that his father was, for some time, an illegal immigrant in Ceylon. There, he got caught in a communal riot between the Sihalese and the Tamils. He was not only severely beaten up but got picked up by police and sent back to India. Ever since, he had not been himself. He would pick quarrels at the slightest pretext and then disappear from the house for days on end. Last time he disappeared was two or three years ago and he never resurfaced thereafter. May be he is still alive but Jose does not have any clue. So the burden of raising the whole family fell on Jose's mother's shoulders long back. Though seventy, she still has a little corner in the main fish market in the city and sells dry fish. Since she is too old now to commute, she sleeps on the market pavement and goes to Kopil only on weekends. Her two daughters, who too sell fish in the same market, keep her supplied with dry fish and some food.

Jose's move to Veli with Sara was much against the wishes of his mother, though this was not an uncommon practice. Even among Christian fishermen, it appears, the bridegroom did often move into the bride's parental house and eventually set up a separate house. Jose was not doing something therefore that was socially unacceptable. However, Jose has not bothered much about the welfare of his aged parents ever since his move to Veli, though, as we shall note, he has gone back to Kopil when he has needed help.

Setting up a new house

Within a year after Sara's return to Veli, i.e. almost two years after her marriage, her father died. So Sara's sister and brothers became the sole responsibility of herself and Jose. The very first thing to do was to marry off Mary. They collected some Rs.400, again as a gift from relatives, friends and neighbours, and got the girl married in Veli itself, within a year of Anthony's death.

As long as Anthony was alive, Sara's aunt did not object to his family squatting on her land. Soon after he died, the aunt madeit known to Sara and Jose that she would like them to move out as early as possible. With the passage of months, her pressure on them became greater and greater. Sara's story is that her aunt did not quite approve of Jose's ways. He was indifferent and arrogant in his behaviour towards her. Also, Jose took to liquor rather with abandon on the days his catch was good and would come home drunk. The aunt strongly disapproved of it. She felt that he should not be wasting money this way. Moreover, though she never verbalised it, she might be scared that Jose would one day claim the right of occupation to a piece of her land.

At last things came to a stage when they were left with no other option but to move out. Jose decided to set up his new hut by squatting on a piece of land near the village Church. The owner of this land was not around, being a soldier in the army. In terms of location, it was ideal, as here they were close to the sea shore, and near the main bay from where the big boats operated. But it was some one else's property. Sara and Jos stayed here for the next seventeen years. Excepting Percy, the first born, all Sara's other six children were born here.

Jose buys a catamaran

Though Jose arrived in Veli as a coolie fisherman, he was soon known as a strong, brave and shrewd fisherman. He was in great demand therefore, by the karamadi [6] owners, who could always do with an additional hand, particularly with a fisherman who understood the sea well and could predict the movements of fish shoals. Also, Jose was trained to be on a karamadi from the age of ten and so had mastered the art well. Jose's one, and major, ambition was to own a catamaran and some nets so that he could go fishing independently. [1] Isaac, a karamadi owner, lent him money to buy a secondhand catamaran on the condition that Jose would thereafter work only for Isaac's karamadi. Stephen, a distant cousin of Sara, lent him the additional money he needed to buy a cotton gill net on the condition that Jose would sell him all the prawns he caught while doing his own fishing. Thus, both the loans, Jose took, though interest free, carried their own terms and conditions.

Jose knew what attaching oneself to a karamadi involved but he was not sure what exactly were the obligations involved in selling his prawns to one person. He found out the latter in due course. Stephen was supposed to pay Jose a price 10 per cent below that he got from the prawn merchant. Actually, Stephen was always cheating him on the price, making more than 20 per cent on Jose's prawns.

A major set back

A major crisis occurred in Sara's life when after 17 years the soldier, on whose land they were squatting, returned home and asked Jose to move away from his land. Jose naturally refused to oblige. He thought that he had acquired the right to his little bit, having been in its occupation for so long. Did you consult anyone well-versed with law? Did you take any steps to establish your right to the land? A simple 'no' was Jose's answer. Occupation itself, he thought, was nine-tenths

ownership. But he was in for the rudest shock of his life, a shock from which he has not fully receovered, and probably never will.

One summer night when the whole family was, as usual, sleeping outside the hut on the sand, the hut was stealthily set on fire. When Jose and Sara woke up, the hut was all a fire and nothing could be saved. In no time, the whole hut was burnt and reduced to ashes along with the nets that Jose had acquired by then. Jose and Sara lost whatever else they had by way of earthly possessions. Their own and children's clothes were gone. The three hens they were keeping were also burnt alive. Sara's only consolation was that at least her family was all safe.

Immediately however, the size itself of her family created a problem. Such a big family could not double up with any friend or relative. It had to have a roof of its own, straightaway. Reluctantly, they went back to Sara's aunt for shelter but found that they were not welcome.

So Jose had to go to the karamadi owner for a fresh loan, which would enable him to buy materials such as coconut palm (cadjan) leaves, poles, ropes etc. to put up a new hut. He also had to pay for the labour he would have to hire for the purpose. Neither Jose himself nor his grown up sons knew the art of the putting up thatched huts. It is interesting that though 90 per cent of the fishermen's houses in this village have thatched roofs, which have to be changed once every two or three years, no fisherman ever puts up his own roof, nor does he assist others in putting it up. They always call their Ezhava neighbours, known as Thandans, to put up the huts, for them.

The karamadi owner

Karamadi is a large seine net. Being a rather expensive piece of fishing equipment, only a few can afford to possess a karamadi. In fact, owning a karamadi carries a certain prestige, the prestige of having made good in life. In Veli, out of the 365 fishermen households, only 29 (i.e. eight percent) own a karamadi. Of course, along with the net go not only the right type of boat, a large Vallam but also metres and metres of coir ropes which cost almost as much as the net itself. Together with the boat, and ropes, the karamadi could currently cost over Rs.10,000.

Operating a karamadi is quite an undertaking. It requires between 30 to 40 people and is very laborious. While the net itself is carried into water in a boat and spread out in the form of a semi circle, the ropes at the two ends are held at the shore to be gradually pulled in, hauling aloft the net. It is interesting to watch two rows of men, 10 to 15 each, standing 100 to 200metres apart, singing as they pull in the ropes, slowly but forcefully. As the net is drawn near to the shore, two or three persons beat on the water in front of the net making loud noise so as to scare the fish from escaping, while men in the boat push the net in towards the shore. All this takes easily two to three hours.

Considering the number of hands a karamadi requires for its operation, it is not difficult to understand why karamadi owners are always looking out for fishermen whom they can somehow keep at their back and call. Thus a karamadi owner is said to be usually willing to make occasional advances or loans to fishermen without charging any interest in return for their commitment to operate his net, as and when he needs them.[8/]

Since there are 29 karamadi owners in Veli village, if all of them were to operate their nets at the same time, they would altogether need 1000 adult men -- no woman is ever supposed to work for a karamadi or for that matter in any fishing operation - whereas the total number of adult men in the fishing households, including those of the karamadi owners is less than 600. That is why every karamadi owner would like to have a certain minimum number of hands, permanently attached to him. In fact, practically every adult male in Veli village is bonded to one or the other of the 29 karamadi owners. But that does not still eliminate shortage of hands. So there is a sort of competition among the karamadi owners for buying up the allegiance of good fishermen. Cases of fishermen shifting their allegiance from one karamadi owner to another do occur therefore. This happens when the latter is prepared not only to take over the fisherman's old debt, but, also to extend to him some additional loan. In fact, that is precisely what happened in the case of Jose.

Does the competition for workers among the karamadi owners place the former in an advantageous position in regard to the share of the catch? The prevailing share of the karamadi owners is 40 percent. In some other types of nets, as for example thattumadi,[9/] the workers are entitled to the same share of the catch. So apparently the fishermen are no better off when working for a karamadi. Actually, however, while the normal daily catch of a karamadi is about two and a half times that of a thattumadi, the number of fishermen engaged in a karamadi has to be seven to eight times greater 30 - 40 as against four to six. Therefore, a worker's share of the normal catch from a karamadi is never more than half of what he gets when working for a thattumadi. What a fisherman gains in terms of an interest free loan from the karamadi owner, he loses in terms of forfeits in terms of his earnings. Moreover, since the [illegible]

of the karamadi gets precedence over everything else, including fishing for oneself with one's own boat and net, the karamadi owner is able to preempt a fisherman's time during the karamadi season, falling between November and April. But it has to be remembered in this context that the peak karamadi months, are the months which are relatively lean for most other types of nets. A fisherman's need to go to the karamadi owner for funds arises also during the lean seasons.

Apart from the inevitable cyclical fluctuations that occur in the movement and formation of fish shoals, lean times recur for two major reasons. Firstly, when the sea is calm and easily manageable, as during the months of December to February, the catch is very poor. Secondly, during the monsoon months, between June and August, the catch can be good but the sea is formidable, particularly for the traditional crafts. Thus both these periods end up being lean seasons for the fishermen and every fishermen has to live on his past earnings or on credit. It is during these periods that a fisherman with little to fall back upon is driven to a money lender or karamadi owner and once the clutches of either take hold of him, the fisherman is hardly ever able to get out of them. In fact, every year, the karamadi owner's grip on him becomes firmer and firmer.

When Jose's hut was reduced to ashes and Sara's aunt refused to give them shelter, he had to go to Isaac, the old karamadi owner, begging for a cash loan to put up a new thatched hut. But Isaac had not been quite happy with Jose. He had become too independent over the years and was not always available for his karamadi operation. So he declined to extend any additional loan. This drove Jose to others. Very often when a fisherman needs a fresh loan over and above what he has already borrowed, he has to run around to the karamadi owners, wine them and feast

them before one of the karamadi owners is ready to part with the right amount of cash. The poorer you are the more you have to spend on these preliminaries as your credit worthiness is low. Jose did ultimately find one karamadi owner, Sonny, who would take over the debt Jose owed to Isaac and also give him some cash to put up his hut. But Jose must, in return, undertake to work regularly for Sonny's karamadi.

Putting up another hut

One he got the cash from Sonny, Jose went about the business of putting up a house. This time Jose and Sara were not prepared to take any chances. So they decided to squat on government land some distance away from the sea front location. Fishermen always prefer for their huts a sea front location. Still this particular location had some positive points. Here, the shoulders of the backwaters had been properly lined with stones. So there was little danger of the hut being flooded in the rainy season. Also the new metalled road leading through this village passed only a few yards away. This meant that the shops, such as the ration shops, the grocery store, and the tea shop were only a few minutes' walk from Sara's hut. Now even a toddy shop has opened, but about that Sara is very sore, for Jose has a great weakness for liquor.[10]

Immediately on getting the loan, Jose bought the materials: plaited palm leaves to make the walls and the roof, arecanut poles and leaves. Then he had to hire some workers. It took them some two days to put up the hut.

One enters the present hut through a door which opens into a small verandah about 10 feet long and five feet wide. The verandah leads both to the kitchen on the right and into a small bed room in front. The kitchen as well as the bed room are practically the same

in area as the verandah. The hut has three door-ways. There are no windows but since the walls too are made of palm leaves they let in plenty of breeze. The family uses the verandah as a sitting room; in the bedroom they keep their belongings. The hut has no latrine. The men go to the sea front while the women go to the backwaters for toilet purposes. Practically everyone in the village does the same though there are a few houses (five percent) with latrines of their own. Most fishermen are reluctant to go in for latrines near the houses, as they are difficult to keep clean without the availability of running water.

Jose has planted a hedge of bamboo and tapioca sticks all around the hut to make a small compound. They have also planted five coconut trees to the back of the hut i.e., on the bank of the backwaters. They should start yielding coconuts in a couple of years. Each sapling cost Sara three rupees at the time she bought them.

Jose and Sara have now been living in the hut for the last seven years with their seven children. For almost two years now, Mercy's husband also has been living with them, and now Mercy has a son as well. So all told eleven persons, ranging in age from one to 45 live in this hut, not more than 150 square feet in area.11/ Except when it rains, practically every one sleeps outside the hut. During day time, men are at the sea front, work or no work, either

watching the boats or playing cards. Women too are out fish vending. In the night, it is pleasant to sleep in the open. Everyone spreads oneself on the sand, very often without any mat or bed-spread. A pile of sand serves as a pillow for those who need one. The problems arise during rains. Then, the whole family has to crowd into the little hut.

Use of backwaters

Sara uses the backwaters for all the washing and cleaning chores in the house. They all bathe in this water but do not use it for drinking or cooking purposes. There is a well nearby from where they bring the water for all such purposes. Usually, it is the job of Sara's daughters to go and fetch the water from the well. Since Mercy is either fish vending or looking after her young one, most of this work falls on Glassey. The well is a good ten minutes walk; the rope and the bucket are always there for anyone to draw water. One may use any private well as no one is supposed to refuse drinking water.

Jose's vasectomy and subsequent accident

When Jose's net got burnt, he was planning to replace his old catamaran. A catamaran lasts around nine to ten years. Now it meant buying a catamaran as well as a net. This he found impossible. It was with difficulty that he could raise the cash to put up his new hut. He was not able to raise an additional amount to buy a catamaran and a net, not even second hand ones.

It was around then that Jose felt that they could not afford to have any more children. They had already seven. Jose knew that the church was not in favour of drastic methods of family planning. But he knew also that there was a Government programme [illegible] 10/ which not only could any man undergo vasectomy free but also be entitled to some cash reward. Ofcourse, since they had already seven children, he would be eligible for only a small cash reward. The church's displeasure was what really bothered him.

he was a very religious man. But the church also played a very important social role in the village. Being reduced to a coolie labourer had pushed him down the social ladder already. Incurring thedispleasure of the church on the issue of family planning might have serious consequences for him and his family. All the same, Jose was convinced that he did not want any further addition to his family. Therefore, he decided to undergo vasectomy. But he decided not to tell anybody about it, not even Sara. In due course, Sara and the whole village came to know of John's operation.

The church did not take notice however. According to the priest, there was no use taking notice once the event had taken place. Moreover, though the priest did not quite say so, Jose was too poor to notice. "His vasectomy would not make much impact on others in the village". Also, Jose and Sara are not regular church goers. Sara seldom goes to the church. She has no decent clothes to wear to church. Occasionally, when she has to go, she borrows a saree from a neighbour. Jose goes more often to the church. Anyone of his many friends will lend him a shirt or lungi to go to the church. Exchanging clothes among close friends is acommon pattern. Those who have clothes are prepared to lend occasionally to their close friends and neighbours. Jose agrees with Sara, however, that the church is only for the rich and that the Parish priest is more keen on cultivating the few rich rather than the many many poor.

Within a year or so after his operation, once when Jose was returning from the sea after a fishing trip, the boat capsized and his back was badly hurt. Jose's back has never been the same again with the result that he has not been able to get back to sea for the past three years. Jose has tried all kinds of treatment but it has been of no avail. He now goes about the beach wrapped up in a lungi, with oil smeared on his back to nurse it in the sun.

Whether or not Jose's virtually permanent disablement has anything to do with vasectomy, the fact remains that in Veli he is now the living proof of what, people believe, can happen to strong and brave fishermen after undergoing vasectomy. They generally feel that after vasectomy, you are no longer enough to face the hazards of the sea. José too is now persuaded that this is so.

What does Sara think of Jose's vasectomy? She too didn't want to have any more children but she is not sure that she herself would have been brave enough to have either undergone the operation herself or suggested it to Jose.

Jose's default to the karamadi owner

Ordinarily, as was stated above, a fisherman in debt to a karamadi owner has to work for him, as and when he launches his karamadi. He has only to send word. But Jose has not been able to go out for work on the karamadi for the past three years. What course of action is open to the karamadi owner? Normally, a karamadi owner applies all types of pressure, including physical force on a defaulting fisherman. In Jose's case, Sonny, the karamadi owner, is convinced that Jose is malingering but is afraid of applying force lest it might turn the village against him out of sympathy for a disabled Jose. But that is only part of the reason. Jose has grown up sons, two of whom have taken to fishing. So one of them must, sooner or later, join his crew, since Jose is in no position to repay his loan. Any karamadi owner will now be interested in coming to Jose's rescue, provided Cleetus or Williams pledges allegiance to him. But Cleetus is, at present, in no mood to tie himself up to any karamadi owner. Williams is too young. Sooner or later, one of these two sons will have to take over the father's bond. Sonny is willing to wait for a few more years. After

all, he will secure the services of a young fisherman for the rest of his working life. Also, Jose's son should turn out to be a good fisherman.

The daughter's wedding

Sara's first born is a daughter, Mercy. She is now about 22 years old, is married and has a one-year old son. She has been a great help to Sara right from her early childhood, for she never went to school. She helped her mother not only with the household chores but also in vending fish.

Mercy grew up into quite an attractive girl. Manuel, the son of a not-so-poor fisherman who not only owned a catamaram and a net of his own but also had two sons working in the army, fell madly in live with her.

One fine day, Manuel broke tradition and went by himself to Sara and Jose asking for Mercy's hand. Sara had no objection provided he would ask for no dowry. Dowry is euphemistically referred to as 'pocket money' in the fishing village. Even for a girl from the poorest household in the village, the dowry is Rs.1,000.[13] When Manuel's parents came to know about this they were mad and threatened Sara and Jose with grave consequences should they encourage Manuel. Manuel was firm however and threatened to commit suicide on Sara's doorsteps if she did not let him marry Mercy. So Jose went to the Parish Priest for help but the priest refused to have anything to do with the matter. The priest apprehended a great deal of inter-family fighting and wanted to keep out of trouble. Ultimately, Jose made up his mind to allow Manuel to marry Mercy, whatever the consequences. He smuggled Mercy and Manuel out to his native village, Kopil. Mercy sneaked out of Veli

as though she was going out to vend fish. It was less difficult for Manuel to sneak out unnoticed. When Jose took them to the Church at Kopil, the priest refused to perform the marriage without the Bishop's permission. Jose was scared that soon Manuel's people would start looking out for him. So Jose with his money lender friend, Stephen, rushed off to the Bishop's House in the city to plead for permission. The Bishop after making sure that the girl and the boy were grown up and wanted to marry each other, finally consented. So the marriage was performed in a great rush.

Though no dowry was involved, Jose ended up spending some Rs.300, which he managed to collect from his relatives and friends. Mercy got a new nylon saree and Manuel a new lungi and shirt. None of the other family members got any new clothes. After the wedding there was a small tea party where they served things bought from the local bakery.

On his return to Veli, Jose broke the news of Mercy's marriage with Manuel in his cool characteristic way. "What can I do, if two young people decide to get married. Any way, the Bishop gave his consent."

First, Manuel's parents and relatives created a hysterical scene. Then they demanded that Stellas, Jose and Sara's first son, should marry Manuel's sister who was mentally retarded. When Jose refused the proposal firmly, they asked for cash. Finally, when the pressure became too much to resist, Jose agreed that he would pay them a sum of Rs.3000 once. Stellas and Cleetus found jobs. The agreement was signed and deposited with the Parish priest. Sara was, and is, very upset about the agreement but Jose laughs it off. Anyway, as Sara puts it, the hot war has

ended but the cold war will go on between the two families. Manuel and Mercy still stay with Sara although they have been married for over two years. Indeed, Manuel has never gone back to his parents since his marriage.

The son-in-law

Manuel went to school for 10 years but he failed to qualify for the School Leaving Certificate. Though he is a well-built young man, he does not know much about fishing. This is true of many other children who go to schools in the fishing villages. Nor does he appear interested in working as a coolie fisherman for someone else. But it is not easy to come by jobs outside, not even a coolie's job. So for over two years ever since his marriage, Manuel sits at home virtually doing no work at all. There are rumours that he and Mercy have resorted to distilling illicit liquor. Sara denies these accusations against her daughter and feels that the other families are jealous that Mercy is so well-married. But is she? "Oh, that does not bother me. Sooner or later, Manuel's people will get reconciled to Mercy. Then everything will be alright."

Mercy has been vending fish and supporting Manuel. She kept going out fish vending till the last day before she went to the nearby missionary hospital for her delivery and went to work within a month after her delivery. Manuel now spends time looking after their infant while Mercy is out at work.

Within a few months after her marriage, Mercy started cooking separately. Manuel was possibly not getting enough to eat from the common kitchen. Sara sensed a sort of time tantrum in him and immediately asked Mercy to cook separately, though in the same kitchen. The kitchen was big enough to put up another set of

stones and start separate cooking. So now right in the centre of Sara's kitchen there are two pots of rice boiling. In a hut like this, they keep the stoves some distance away from the walls because there is always the danger of the cadjan leaves catching fire. Mercy and Manuel occupy the only bed room in the hut together with their one year old son. The rest of the family makes do with the verandah.

A son's search for a clean job

Sara's first son, Stellas is now 19 years of age. He is lean, lanky, and always well groomed. Still, one of his major bones of contention with his parents is that his clothes are not in keeping with the latest trends in fashion. So he often borrows clothes from his friends and somehow manages to dress well.

Stellas was in school for eightyears. Then he started losing interest in studies. Sara did not suspect anything until the teacher sent word that Stellas was not attending school regularly. Sara feels unhappy that in spite of all her efforts to see Stellas through school, he gave up studies half way. What is worse, he hates to do manual work, particularly if it soils his hands and clothes.[14/] Stellas is not interested in fishing either. Indeed he knows very little about it. He goes to the village tailor in the evenings to learn the craft from him. But Sara doubts that he is learning much. She believes that Stellas likes to go to the tailor's shop to hear film music on the radio. The major part of the day Stellas spends outside his house playing, or watching people play, cards, an eternal pastime with the fishermen in the village.

Stellas says he would like to work in an office and failing that become an apprentice to a motor mechanic or an electrician and learn a trade. Usually, a motor mechanic running a road-side garage recruits youngsters who have some schooling and trains them on the job for a period ranging from two to five years, depending on the trainee's receptivity and willingness to slog. For this, the motor mechanic demands a cash payment of Rs.500 to 600 from the trainee. What makes the system even more unattractive is that during the long period of apprenticeship, the trainee has to support himself. "Stellas is not made of that stuff. Nor have I the hard cash to pay up the motor mechanic for him." That is how Sara reacts.

All the same, Sara is worried about Stellas, less however because he is a drag on her now than because of the uncertainty about how he will ever stand on his own legs. Jose believes that it was a mistake not to initiate Stellas into fishing from his childhood. "The school teaches you the three R's but it makes you unfit for fishing, indeed for any work that requires the use of your hands and feet." Jose is still hopeful that Stellas will one day realise the futility of his present ways and agree to take up some manual work, preferably fishing, because his brothers and relatives are already in that work. Unlike Sara, however, Jose does not enter into any daily argument with Stellas about what he does or does not do. Jose would prefer that Sara also leaves Stellas alone. But their main worry is the growing tension between Stellas and Cleetus. While Stellas whiles away his time on the pretext that he cannot find work, Cleetus has to share whatever he earns while working hard for other fishermen. Stellas is always groomed like a white-collar worker while Cleetus looks a labourer.

The second son cuts his heel

Cleetus, the second son, is about two years younger than Stellas but looks healtheir and stronger. Cleetus attended school for only four years. He was always made to skip school so that he could help his father in fishing. Finally, he gave it up altogether as the teachers refused to let him be absent for such long stretches.

Last year he stepped on a rusted nail while walking on the beach and had a deep cut in his foot which took some months to heal. So he had to stay away from work.

There is a small Government dispensary in the village right in the compound of the church. But the doctor either is on leave or has very long queues to attend to when he/she is on duty. So nobody gets sufficient attention. It appears that none of the doctors who are posted to this dispensary like to stay here. They have to come all the way from Trivandrum city. Also, they find the fishermen too dirty and smelly and they say so openly. Finally, they have little scope for private practice.

When Cleetus cut his foot, it took days to see the doctor at the dispensary. By then, the wound had became septic and he started running temperature. So he decided to go to the major city hospital about 15 kilometres away. Cleetus is convinced that his wound would have healed within a weak or ten days if it had been properly attended to the day he got hurt. As a result of this negligence, he could not go out fishing for months and had to spend part of Sara's meagre earnings for commuting to go to the hospital.

The keen keen Williams

After Cleetus, comes the 15-year old Williams. He too dropped out from school because he was always more interested in fishing than studies. He was constantly pestering his father or Cleetus with questions.[15] Moreover, Sara was so disappointed with Stellas that she did not want Williams to end up as good for nothing. Williams, like every other teenager, started by working for the various karamadis. Youngsters are a great help because of their enthusiasm. Moreover, teenagers do not have to be given an adult share of the catch. But Williams is getting more and more accepted as an adult. In this regard, being Cleetus's brother is a help, because Cleetus is already considered a good fisherman.

The second daughter

Glassey is Sara's second daughter. She has a sweet face but looks definitely small and very undernourished for her fourteen years. Sara stopped her after she had attended school for three years. Now she is the full-time housekeeper. She fetches practically all the water from the well and looks after the other daily chores when Sara is out at work vending fish. She also does does some baby sitting for Mercy when Manuel is not in the house.

By the age of ten, Glassey, like most other girls from fishing households in the village, had mastered virtually all the chores necessary to run a house. Girls of that age have got to take on the responsibility of running a house because their mothers and elder sisters go out to vend fish. Glassey too is looking forward to the day when she can go out with her mother and be able to sell fish instead of being exclusively confined to household chores, day in and day out.

The fourth and fifth sons

Stanley and John are 11 and nine respectively. They both are going to the local primary school, run by the church. There have been continuing problems with the school on account of some misunderstanding between the local community and the teachers. The teachers complain that students are very irregular. Some disappear for months together during the fishing season to help parents. Also when they come to school, they are unclean, very shabbily dressed and generally uninterested in studies. The local people feel that the teachers, who are practically all outsiders, i.e. from non-fishing households, are indifferent to the circumstances of the parents and their children. So, temporarily, the school had to be closed down. The parents wanted a total change of teachers but the Bishop was reluctant to oblige. Ultimately, a compromise was worked out and the school has resumed functioning.

A bad year

The year, 1977, was not particularily good for the fishermen of Veli. January, February, June and July are lean months. This time, however, the catch was not good at all even during the other months. March to May is usually the period of maximum catch for the kanangis, but this year the catch was very small. During other months too, the yield for various other nets, that most fishermen ordinarily work with, was poor. Everyone in Veli feels that the rockets sent up from the nearby launching pad of the Space Centre have driven away the fishes to the other sectors. But the launching pad has been there for almost 15 years now. It turns out, however, that there is a sort of cycle in fish catch.[16/] Some years are good and others bad and they seem to alternate with some amount of regularity. So things were bad this year for everyone in this village but as always it was worse for those who, like the landless agricultural labourers,

eke out their living entirely from work as coolie fishermen. When the prospects of catch are not bright, a fisherman owning a catamaran goes to the sea alone. This way, he does not have to share the catch with someone else. But Sara's household does not own a catamaran now.

In this house, there were four adult men, excluding Manuel, the son-in-law, but including 15-year old Williams, all virtually without work for days on end. The result has been that the household came to depend almost entirely on Sara's income from fish vending. Unfortunately, however, Sara, as we shall see presently, is not a very smart fish vendor.

Sex roles in fish vending

A distinct sex-typing of roles prevails in the buying and selling of fish. Only women take part in headload fish vending. Moreover, while women head-load fish vendors are drawn entirely from fishing households, this is not necessarily the case with male cyclist fish vendors. All cyclist fish vendors, who, for instance, come to Veli to buy fish, belong to the Muslim community and come from distant villages. Not a single man from Veli is occupied in the vending of fish. Actually, there seems to be some sort of taboo attached to fishermen engaging in buying and selling fish. Even when it comes to selling of the catch, once the boats reach the shore, fishermen behave as though they have no interest in the selling of the catch. The whole task of disposal is left to other persons, no longer engaged in fishing, who take over the auctioning of the catch and what follows thereafter.

Besides the cyclist vendors, there are fish merchants who come in trucks whenever the catch is good, in terms of both variety and quantity. Veli is somewhat peculiar in that not even one such truck owning fish merchant resides in the village. Fish merchants take the fish in trucks over long distances and distribute it among fish vendors in the major markets in cities and towns. Sometimes, when the fish

catch is really poor you cannot see a single male buyer of fish on the beach, merchants or cyclist vendors, for days on end. But women fish vendors are always there to buy whatever catch fishermen bring in.

Unequal competition

Male cyclist vendors cater usually to bigger and more distant markets and customers. The quantity they carry is also very much larger than what the female vendors carry on their heads. Their speed itself is a great advantage. Still, women fish vendors have survived. The reason for this principally is that female fish vendors cater mainly to very low income households. They sit at small way-side markets or carry their fish to houses scattered all round the paddy fields. Thus while men sell fish in large quantities in central markets, to tea shops, hotels and clubs, women reach out people in, or near, their houses in practically all the remote corners. If no fresh fish is available, the women vendors carry dry fish instead. Ofcourse, dry fish is sold also in special stalls in the markets which only specialise in dry fish.

Wayside markets

Women fish vendors cover all their distances on foot. Most of them cover between 20 to 30 kilometres everyday. While some women do have corners of their own even in major fish markets in towns and cities, most women fish vendors operate through the numerous wayside markets located all over a town at a distance of every one kilometre or so.

A wayside market is usually an entirely female affair. Both the buyers as well as the sellers are generally women. The market is not entirely a fish market. There will always be some other women

selling spices, vegetables, tapioca and even mud pots. Fish is sold in these markets twice a day, once in the morning and then again in the afternoon, but the fish vendors are not the same.

The group of 13

The whole of last year, 1976, Sara used to buy fish as part of a group. She and 12 other women friends from Veli would pool their cash and watch out for the boats coming on the shore. As a group, they could compete better with the male buyers since they could bid for larger lots of fish catch. Moreover, they were not bidding against each other. The cyclist vendors had always a lot more cash, either their own or of the fish merchants they worked for. Individually, each of the women in this group would have to wait for smaller lots to be auctioned and also ended up bidding against each other. Naturally, therefore, male buyers did not quite like the women fish vendors operating as a group.

Every one of these women contributed cash equally to the pool and also shared the catch equally. But there was some scope for default in cash payment so long as one paid up the arrears in a day or two. When Sara started falling behind in her contributions, the others in the group started protesting. Her usual defence was that she could not sell fish at a price to cover the cost. Eventually they got fed up and threw her out of the group. Sara does not think she can go back to the group.

Sara and the fish merchant

During most of 1977, Sara bought her fish from a wholesale fish merchant in the fish market at Pettah, a suburb of Trivandrum city. Sara had to go early in the morning to the fish market which attracts fish supplies from as far as Quilon, a major fishing harbour about 60 kilometres away. Fish comes from there in trucks,

stacked on ice. Most of the fish merchants in the market are Muslims. Sara has a credit line of Rs.15, extended to her by a particular merchant. She is obliged to pay back the next day. Only then can she buy again fish for full Rs.15. Since the households she caters to are relatively low income households, she buys only the cheaper varieties of fish that her customers can afford.

Usually, these are sardines, ribbon fish and mackerel, depending upon the season. Since all these are iced fish they are not as popular as fresh fish. If a housewife wants something very special like a more expensive variety of fish, they tell Sara in advance and she gets it for them.

The fish merchant Sara deals with in the market treats her with scant respect and is rather rough and rude. Indeed, he behaves as if he is doing Sara a great favour in selling her fish on credit. Actually, the price he charges Sara is always higher than the prevailing wholesale price for each variety. Sara takes a very subservient attitude however. "Who else will sell me fish on credit"?

Naturally Sara's margin of profit now is less than when she used to buy fish at the sea front. The houses she caters to will stop buying from her if they feel that they are over-charged. As a result, Sara's margin of profit has come down. Sometimes, it is so low that she can barely cover the cost.

Sara has seldom defaulted for more than a couple of days for almost a year now but she is still very scared of the merchant. She has little choice. All of these merchants are alike. This one only acts rough but is always forgiving if [illegible] a couple of days. Others will have me hauled up and beaten in two days

The barefoot vendorx

Sara has to cover on foot a distance of about six kilometres, from the fish market to reach the locality where she vends fish. There is an unwritten law whereby way-side markets and houses are distributed between vendors and encroachment is looked down upon. In fact, mostly, those of the fish vendors who sell in the wayside markets don't go to houses and those who go from house to house are not supposed to sit in the wayside markets. However, this does not prevent one from selling if specially approached on the road by a customer.

Usually, when she goes vending, Sara wears a checked lungi which probably was washed with soap a year back. This she wraps over a piece of cloth, equally dirty, that serves as per petticoat. Her top is a plain green blouse with a V neck, pinned in the front, worn over a bodice. Her type of blouse, called chatta, was designed by the missionaries. The blouse is such that while the midriff would not show, one need not use an upper cloth to cover the breasts.

On her head, Sara keeps a small, dirty towel, twisted and coiled, to rest the basket of fish. On the coiled towel are placed two long strips of dry areca leaves and then the basket full of fish which again is covered with areca leaves. This upper set of areca leaves protects the fish from the sun, crows and dust. The leaves under the basket keeps Sara's hair and dress from getting wet. Any water that drips down from the basket is drained off on to the road from either end of these areca strips. Sara balances the basket on her head in such a way that both her hands are free to move as she races to the houses of her clients. She cannot use the public transport even if she has the money as her basket takes too much space and is considered messy by the bus staff. There was a time when fish vendors were not allowed inside tea shops for the same reason. They would buy and eat tea and snacks on the road side. Sara has never had time even to think of all these luxuries.

As far as possible, she takes short cuts and follows cross-country paths along the bunds in the paddy fields. Fish must be taken fast lest it gets bad. Then no one will buy it. "You cannot fool people here about the quality of fish". In order to walk fast, she tucks her lungi a couple of inches high at the back and with the basket balanced properly on her head, she virtually runs. Like most other fish vendors, Sara uses no footwear whatsoever.

The houses that Sara goes to are the very same houses to which her mother used to go, vending fish. Sara recalls going along with her mother from the age of nine or ten. Sara divided the mother's houses equally with her sister, Mary.. But Mary is sick and gave up vending fish. Some other women vendors from Veli have taken over Mary's houses. Sara does not know, or tell, how much money her sister got for giving away her houses. Actually, Sara herself is not able to cater to all the houses that came to her share from her mother. She just doesn't have large enough quantity of fish. So she has given away some of her houses to Mercy, particularly the ones that are closer to the main road so that Mercy can vend fish fast and get back to her baby soon. Thus Sara herself has only 10 houses to whom she supplies fish regularly.

In all these ten houses, they wait daily for Sara to buy fish. Though a few other fish vendors operate in the neighbourhood, they wouldnot normally try to sell to these houses lest Sara picks up a big quarrel. Most of these households have small sized far holdings, with one or two members working in a regular job. Sara reaches these houses by around 10 in the morning so that they can buy fish for lunch. She walks straight into the courtyard of a house, takes down her basket and sits down on the platform near the kitchen, uncovering her basket. She can unload the basket herself if it is not heavy. Otherwise, she requests one of the members of the

household to help her unload the basket. The women of the house come out, take a look at the contents of Sara's basket and then ask for the variety they want. Usually, they ask for fish not by count or weight but by money's worth. "Give me sardines for 50 paise or one rupee".

Then starts the haggling over the quantity. Whatever quantity Sara first offers is never right. They must ask for a little more. They would complain that other fish vendors coming to the neighbourhood offer more for the same money. Sometimes they would object to the quantity of sand sticking on to the fish suspecting that it might be stale. "But I cannot go back to those houses if I cheat them on price or quantity. They can always go to the nearby market and buy their fish."

Sara takes all this bargaining in her stride. Always, she gives a little extra. How does Sara get paid for the fish she sells? It all depends on whether the housewife has ready cash with her or not. If not, she asks Sara either to come back the same day after making a round of the other houses or to collect it the next day. Sometimes, Sara gets paid in kind, particularly during harvest times. When Sara herself is short of cash, she even borrows from one of the housewives, and repays her debt with fish in a couple of days or longer, depending on how much she has borrowed. Her transactions with these houses on any one day are a mixture of some or all of these arrangements.

On a normal day, Sara is through with whatever little fish she has to sell by early afternoon, say two O' clock. She gets home two hours later carrying money, rice, coconut etc. and sometimes even cooking fuel. She does not mind being paid in rice. Usually, the rice that these housewives give her in exchange is of good quality which she can easily trade off for cash if necessary. Otherwise she keeps it for use at home. Nor does she mind being paid in coconuts, tamarind, etc. These are all things that [illegible] otherwise have

to buy. And Sara does not think that the housewives she deals with try to cheat her on this exchange in-kind. In fact, usually Sara herself borrows in kind. Being short of cash themselves, the housewives are more ready to lend in kind than in cash. Do they charge her any interest? "No. But I must sell them fish regularly and gradually repay my debt." This year, she has borrowed Rs.30 from two of the housewives. From one she took rice worth Rs.20 and from the other she borrowed Rs.10 in cash.

Since Sara does not have anything to eat in the morning, she always looks forward to getting some food, left over or fresh, from one of these houses during the course of her daily round. She makes sure however that she does not scrounge on the same house everyday. What sort of food do they give her to eat? "Beggars cannot be choosers. Is it not enough if I get something to keep me going?"

Sara is quite a pan addict. So she invariably asks one of the women, who themselves chew, for a pan. In fact, she must start her day with a pan The moment she washes and brushes her teeth early in the morning she takes one pan. She feels this keeps away her tooth ache as well as hunger. Jose too must have his supply of pans. Actually, he is even more addicted to it than Sara. Sara spends, on average, 50 paise every day on pan for Jose and herself.

Her daily earnings

Sara makes three to four rupees a day by fish vending when all her transactions, in cash or in kind, are taken into account. She doesnot keep any fish to take home. Also, she must not touch the money due back to the fish merchant next morning. If she is unable to return his full money next morning, he will get angry and may refuse to sell her fish again. If she does not turn up at the merchant's shop every monring and clear her previous day's amount,

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the merchant himself or his agent, may be standing at her door step the very next day and make a big scene. It can be an ugly scene and Sara likes to avoid it as far as possible.

On her defaults, the fish merchant charges a monthly interest at the rate of five per cent. In this way, she has accumulated a debt of Rs.20 with the merchant. This is over and above the amount that she has to repay every morning with respect to the fish she purchased from the merchant the previous morning.

Two famines in a year

In 1977, the fisherfolk of Veli were suffering on account of the shortage of fish catch, which reduced everybody's income, though not necessarily his or her work. The village Parish Committee declared "famine" twice during the year, once in February and again in July. It was decided that out of the kuthaka contributions collected by the church, every family should be lent a sum not exceeding Rs.30 depending on the size of the family to tide over the difficulties. Jose and Sara also received Rs.30 and Sara used it immediately to clear her accounts with the village grocery shop and the fish merchant.

A bank loan

One of the nationalised banks has a branch, located not far from Veli village. In pursuance of the recent policy of all commercial banks to extend some credit to the "weaker" sections of the community, this branch decided to lend some money to the women fish vendors in Veli on concessional terms.

The bank received 150 applications and has given a loan of Rs.120 each to 148 women. The remaining two also will get the loan once certain procedural formalities are taken care of. The bank

charges interest at a very low rate of only four percent per annum. The repayment can be made in small lots of five rupees or more.

Sara took her first loan in February 1977. She has been repaying almost every other month at the rate of Rs.20 so that by early 1978 she had repaid the whole principal with interest and this entitled her to a fresh loan of Rs.120 from the bank. Both the times, Sara did not use the bank loan, not even a portion thereof, to buy more fish. Out of the first bank loan she cleared her past debts and bought some new clothes. When the time came for paying up the last two instalments to the bank, she borrowed Rs.40 and cleared the bank loan. "I knew I would pay up Rs.40 immediately the bank gave me the second loan. Also, I would keep on one side another Rs.20 to be paid in the first instalment. That is exactly what I did". Out of the balance of the second loan, Sara undertook to do the urgent repairs to her house.

Sara hopes that with 1978 being a reasonably good year for fish catch, Cleetus and Williams will help her pay back the bank's instalments as they fall due. "Only if we have a catamaran of our own and a couple of nets, can our situation make a distinct improvement. The bank should give Jose a loan of Rs.1000. We shall pay it back fast and be out of the wood altogether."

Her ration entitlement

Sara holds a 17 unit ration card. Of the cereals, rice and wheat, available at the fair price shop, Sara buys only rice. She never buys wheat. No one in the house likes to eat any wheat preparation. Also Sara never bothered to learn about cooking wheat. Wheat has to be cleaned and taken to the mill to be ground into flour. Also, one needs a few special types of kitchen gadgets, which Sara does not possess. Sara's rice entitlement works out to be nine and a half kilograms per week. She buys all of this entitlement with religious regularity.

Under an informal arrangement, she was surrendering her sugar entitlement of two kilos every month to one of the grocery stores at a premium. This premium was always lower than the actual difference at any time, between the open market price and the fair price. Now this source of a few extra rupees has been plugged, with sugar having been taken out of control altogether.

Sara does need a small quantity of sugar for sweetening the tea she makes for herself on returning from her daily round of fish vending. But she prefers to buy it daily for a small change, along with her grocery. "Storing sugar at home never works". On the other hand, when she surrendered her sugar entitlement in full, she could get three to four rupees in lump with which she could do one day's essential grocery shopping.

Her daily shopping

There are certain things that Sara has to buy every day whether or not, she, or anyone else in the family, is at work. She needs a minimum of five rupees every day to buy the very basic essentials necessary to feed the family at its bare minimum. Her two main items of daily expenditure are three kilo of tapioca for Rs.1.20 and ration rice, approximately one and 1/3 kilo, for Rs.2.10. She has to buy her firewood also. There is no nearby shrubbery where she or Glassey can go to collect twigs. Also, she buys whatever quantity of vegetables, leafy and other spices, including chillies, and coconut on a daily basis. The only item she seldom buys is fish because there is always some of it, fresh or dried, available in the house.

Then there are a few other musts, as far as daily spending goes. Jose has to have his morning tea outside at the nearby village stall and also his daily quota of bidis and pan. Sara

Sara too chews pan but brews her own tea and sweetens it with either palm or cane sugar, depending on the money she has to spare from her daily shopping.

Sara tries to do the major part of her shopping on her way back home from her daily round, late in the afternoon. Usually, she stops at one of the wayside markets to get her daily supply of tapioca, chillies and leafy spices. Also she stops by at one of the grocery shops to buy salt and dry spices, as and when required. Glassey is the one who goes to the ration shop to buy rice. Though they cook two meals a day, the major meal is always cooked in the evening after Sara returns home. She would then know what else she has to buy besides the things she has bought home. Glassey runs across to one of the shops on the road-side for the purpose. Whether it is Sara or Glassey who does the shopping, the quantities they buy depend on the cash on hand with Sara.

The major meal

Sara lights the fire around 5'O clock in the afternoon and cooks tapioca first because it takes longer to cook. Then comes the turn of rice. While tapioca and rice are getting cooked, she grinds the spices into a thin paste. This takes a good thirty to forty minutes. She prepares the fish curry the last.

Food is usually ready before 8'O clock in the evening. It is first served to Jose and the boys. Sara is frankly partial to men in the distribution of rice. Men get a larger share per capita of rice than women i.e. Sara herself and Glassery. But everyone takes tapioca also.

After dinner is over, Sara must get down to essential cleaning. She rinses the vessels and leaves them near the coconut

tree outside to be washed in the morning with ash and mud. Usually, she does not ask Glassey to help her with the vessels in the night. That is a chore which Glassey has to do all by herself after the day meal when Sara is out vending fish.

The average per capita daily availability of food in Sara's household works out to 1450 calories only. So this is a clear case of distinct undernourishment. But if Jose and Stellas are not working they need less food than Clara, Cleetus and Williams, the other three adults in the household. It is doubtful however that food is distributed within the household according to the physical work each member has to put in. The males seem to be eating better than the females.[16]

Summary observations

All female fish vendors come from poor households. However, Sara is probably the poorest among the female fish vendors. Her mother was a fish vendor. So is she and so also is her married daughter. It is most unlikely that her second daughter who has entered her teens already will do anything different. There is hardly any difference in the kind of life that her daughters will probably lead, though some of the things around her house have changed considerably during Sara's own life time.

Though there are four able-bodied men in the house, they have come to depend on Sara for the day to day running of the house. Still, while the men not only spend their time (and even money when they can get hold of it) as they please, Sara has neither known leisure nor got much choice in spending the little money she makes every day. All of it must be spent just to keep the family alive.

Sara's husband has not been working for some years now, partly, no doubt, because he has not been well enough but partly because he has no boat of his own which he can take out to fish for as long as his health permits. However, even when he worked, his own (as distinct from the family's) claims on his earnings always came first.

The first son, whom they sent to school with great difficulty has proved more of a liability than an asset. The second and third sons, who are no shirkers as far as work is concerned, do not feel strongly obliged to help Sara in running the household. They, probably, bring home some fish and contribute a fraction of what they earn when Sara is really down and out. The rest of what they earn they spend on themselves. When Sara has time to think of what lies ahead, the future looks to her so bleak and hopeless that she regrets why she had this free moment to think.

Notes and References

1. Latin Christians form one of the three main divisions of the Catholics of Kerala, the other two being the Romo-Syrians and the Syro-Malankara Catholics. The difference among the three divisions is only rit al; in the articles of faith or in the manner of worship no differences exist. See Census of India, 1961, Volume VII, Kerala, Part VI, Village Survey Monographs, Trivandrum district, 1963 pp.156-8 and 208-10.

2. See Village Survey Monographs, 1961, op. cit. p. 157.

3. Kuthaka is a voluntary contribution made by the fishermen as a fixed proportion of their daily catch. Initially, i.e. during the early stages of the development of the church, this was possibly necessary to make funds available for the construction of churches. But since the church has continued to demand contributions from the fishermen, it has become a sort of regular tax which imposes the same proportional burden on all fishermen, rich or poor. The justification advanced for continuing with this practice is that the church needs money to be run and also to build up a fund which can be drawn upon to help the community during calamities, like famines and epidemics. The Kuthaka collection varies from one fishing village to the other. In Veli, the collection is made at the rate of 10 per cent of the daily catch through a number of agents who bid for the right of collection every year. Usually, the highest bidders get this right. In Veli, the kuthaka collection is shared each year by 20 to 25 persons, each undertaking to make the collection from a particular karamadi owner and the men working in that karamadi. The auction in 1977 was for a total sum of Rs.66,000. Assuming that the agent keeps, on an average, about 20% of the collection he makes, the total amount estimated for collection was possibly Rs.85,000 - out of a total fish catch of the value of Rs.8,50,000 in that year.

4. Catamaran is a small fishing boat, locally known as Chalathadi. The craft is put together by joining three or five logs of light wood tied at the ends firmly with coir ropes. Catamarans vary in size. While the shorter ones can carry just two people, the longer ones can carry four to five people. Though relatively inexpensive, the catamaran is an extremely versatile craft. It can be launched from any point on the coast in practically any season of the year. Once across the surf, it proves an excellent and fast sailing craft. A split bamboo, about 1.5 metre in length, is used as an oar. The catamaran usually operates within the range of naked vision of land-marks on the coast but the daring fishermen go far into the sea for long-line fishing.

5. Net making is an art that most men and women in fishing households know. While a certain amount of mending has to be done by fishermen after practically every fishing expedition, making of new nets is taken up during lean seasons ..

Nets are made from different fibres. The traditional nets were made out of jute, hemp or cotton thread but in recent years the use of nylon thread has become popular. Though fishermen find handling nylon thread a strain on their fingers and eyes, nylon nets last longer than nets made out of natural fibres. The latter require much greater care and maintnance.

The equipment used for net making is very simple and inexpensive. All one needs by way of equipment are a shuttle made of bamboo or wood and a mesh gauge. The shuttle is so shaped that at both its end it has long curved prongs with their tips nearly meeting. The method of loading the shuttle is simple. The twine is simply led round and round it length ways between the prongs at either end until the shuttle is fully loaded. The thread should be held firmly into position so that a tidy and compact load is formed. The mesh guage is also made of wood or bamboo. It is meant for regulating the size of meshes. While webbing, the twine is wound round the mesh stick and a knot is tied. A different gauge is required for making every different size of mesh. Expert fishermen, especially while mending their nets, use only their fingers as gauges.

Every fisherman must know not only how to tie mesh knots but also various other knots necessary for finishing loose ends, for joining pieces of twine and for joining two patches of netting. While practically everyone in the fishing households in Veli is conversant with net making, there is hardly any household in this village which can be said to live entirely by net making. Nor is it now the full-time occupation of any man or woman in the village.

6. Karamadi is a large shore seine net used for bulk fishery, especially along the shore in shallow water. As we note later on in the text, only a few of the better off fishing households own this net. These are also the households which engage in money lending among the fishermen, with a view however to secure in return the allegiance of fishermen for running their karamadi. These nets are used mostly during the calm months between November to April for catching the pelagic shoaling fishes, like sardines, mackerels and anchovies, pomfret and seer fish.

7. Most fisherman would like to own at least a small catamaran and one net so that they could go fishing independently sometime. A fisherman needs to own several different types of nets to be productive throughout the year as no one net can catch all types of fish. While seine nets are owned by the richer fishermen, the gill net is what a poor fisherman tries to own. Gill nets stand virtually as net walls, when spread out in water, with the help of floats and dead weight. They are laid in the transverse direction of the migratory fish. Gill nets are so called because when the fish try to run through them their gills get caught in the meshes. There are two types of gill nets: set gill nets, and drifting gill nets. The set type gill net is used from a stationary craft anchored in the fishing area and can be either surface or bottom set nets. The drift type of gill nets are attached to the side of a catamaran and the craft and net drift with the current.

8. See Village Survey Monographs, op. cit., p.196.

9. Thattumadi is also a seine net but it is operated from two boats at a depth of 10 to 20 fathoms. The number of persons required to operate the net varies between 4 and 6.

10. The weakness of fishermen for alchohol is common all over. In Kerala they go for toddy. "Their great luxury is toddy without which they cannot get on. Their hard work in fishing and boat racing demands it, and a fisherman can go on with his work for hours together with the drinking of toddy or a promise of it on reaching the shore, can endure him to row his canoe against adverse winds and currents." See L.K. Iyer, "The Cochin Tribes and Castes" 1912, Ch.XIII, p.233

11. "During the summer months cooking is done outside the houses, and very few take rest inside them after hardwork, for even during hot days, their compounds are open and breezy enough, when they may be seen basking in the sun after midnight toil, or drying the nets or the fish". See L.K. Iyer, op. cit. p.238.

12. The family planning programme in the State of Kerala made a modest beginning in 1955.

13. The dowry system is found in all communities in this part of India, but few communities attach so great significance to dowry as catholics irrespective of the economic status of the household". See A.M. Klausen, Kerala Fishermen and the Indo-Norwegian Pilot Project, 1968, UNIVERSITETSFORLAGET, p. 47.

14. A somewhat similar situation, it appears, exists in Africa. "Because what is taught in the school is prevalent to local (rural) needs and development and school instills false (unrealistic) attitudes and aspirations in their products. See J.R. Eckle, Education and Unemployment, Manpower and Un-Employment Research in Africa, 1973, p.39.

15. As P.R.G. Mathur describes it, the manner in which the technology of fishing is transmitted from one generations to another involves no special mechanism. Boys generally learn the technique of fishing through involvement in the various operations. From the ages of 7 they start carrying fishing gear, like coir ropes, rudder oars, from home to the boats. Teenagers sometimes accompany the boats to the mid-sea and help the elders in propelling the oars. See P.R.G. Mathur, Mappilla Fisher Folk of Kerala, A study in interrelations between habitat, technology, economy, society and culture, Kerala Historical Society, 1977. p.179.

16. The ICMR norms for those engaged in physical work activity are 3900 and 3000 calories for male and female adults as against 2400 and 2000 calories respectively for those not so engaged. Thus even if Sara and Jose were consuming the same quantity of food, Sara's caloric deficiency would work out to 1750 units as against Joce's deficiency of only 1150 units, because Jose is not working these days.

CHAPTER V

DEVAKI, THE CONSTRUCTION WORKER

I

Forty two years old Devaki, Ezhava by caste, earns her livelihood by working for the construction industry.[1] She is tall and slim with not an extra ounce of fat on her and has well chiselled features. She is always neatly dressed when you meet her on the road. Usually, she wears a checked Mundu, wrap around skirt, worn over a knee length petticoat, and a plain blouse with a thin towel thrown over her shoulders. Her hair is neatly combed and securely tied into a small neat bun at the nape of her neck.

Her early childhood

Devaki was born in a small weaving town, Balaramapuram,[2] some fifteen kilometres away from Trivandrum city. Both her parents, Chinnamma and Appu, were weavers by profession and so were her great grand parents. Chinnamma's parents owned a cloth shop and were people of some means while Appu's father Xavier, a Christian, owned a toddy shop, but his mother, a Hindu, came from a weaving family who never really got converted inspite of a Church marriage. Appu lost his mother when he was very young and was raised by his uncles. Appu went to school for three or four years and later helped with weaving. When Appu married Chinnamma, they set up their own house on the little 10 cent piece of land that came to Appu from his deceased mother's share. His three younger brothers also moved with him. Chinnamma and the four boys worked together weaving on their two pit looms and cultivating land. In addition to the land that Appu and his brothers got from their uncles, Chinnamma had brought an acre of land in dowry.

While living together, the brother [illegible] started sharing with him the affections of Chinnamma. Her first born Devaki is in fact believed to have been fathered [illegible]

she bears a strong resemblance to him.[3] Devaki is not the least bothered, however, about the doubt as to her true father. Since she grew up with Appu, she considers him as her father though, as she recalls, Appu never liked her much and sent her off frequently to her grandparents' house. Devaki feels that Appu possibly resented her being Manian's daughter. Even otherwise, Appu had perhaps a complex vis-a-vis Manian who was conscientious and hardworking. Appu, by comparison, was always easy going. He would work only in fits and starts. Also, he was not very careful in spending money and was indifferent about managing the house.

Around the time of Devaki's early childhood, the handloom industry itself was facing severe competition from mill-made-cloth,[4] and many persons from the weaving families, particularly the younger folk, were compelled to move into other occupations.

Though Chinnamma and Appu owned two looms, weaving hardly fetched them any money. The wages for unskilled coolie labour were better. As things went from bad to worse, Appu sold away his own as well as Chinnamma's land, bit by bit, to make both ends meet.

Devaki herself was never sent to school. Once she was around seven years old, she started working for the neighbouring weaving families. She still remembers that her daily wage came to just one chakram, equivalent to about one-tenth of a rupee.[5] When she was not out at work, Devaki washelping her mother with weaving, house-work or looking after the children. In fact, Devaki had to help with the work in the house in a big way, because her mother had too much on her hands to manage single-handed. Chinnamma had, in all, eleven children, all delivered at home with the help of midwives and relatives. Only four of them have survived, two boys and two girls, including Devaki.

Devaki remembers the frequent quarrels between her parents. The quarrel was almost always about money. Sometimes it was about not earning enough, sometimes about not bringing home enough, but often about selling away land.

first spend it on himself. Probably, he was taking liquor now and then. More than that, he was free with women and it was a sore point in their relations. Once, when Chinnamma's widowed elder sister came over to help with her confinement, she conceived from Appu.[6] She, then, stayed on and the two sisters lived together for some four years before the elder one decided to move with her child to her parental home.

The puberty ecremony

Devaki underwent talikettukalyanam, the marriage initiation ceremony, when she was 28 days old. The tali, gold chain, was tied around her neck by her mother's brother's eight year old son, Vellu.

Normally, a girl comes of age by the age of 13-14. That is when she is supposed to attain puberty and undergo an important ceremony called tirandukuli.[8] Devaki had not attained her puberty though she had turned seventeen. This was causing great concern to her mother and relatives. She remembers being teased that she was going to be a swami, saint . The thought of the daughter not attaining womanhood was simply impossible to entertain for a mother. So she consulted a mantravadi[9] and performed the necessary rites to placate the spirits. The ritual took full three days and meant considerable expense. But it had to be undergone.

As it happened, a few months after the ritual Devaki started her periods, to the great relief of one and all. So she could now undergo the puberty bath, tirandukuli. She recalls being locked up in a room for seven days, not to be touched by any woman, nor to be seen by any man.[10] On the seventh day, she was taken out and given a ceremonial bath. To perform the various rites associated with the puberty bath, meant further expense for Chinnamma. But that did not stop, or delay, her from planning the next thing, that is the daughter's marriage. The search for a bridegroom started at once. It showed the anxiety of the mother to see that the daughter got married as early as possible.

Though Devaki's cousin had tied the tali round her neck when she was just 28 days old, his parents were not interested in having Devaki now for his wife.

Her marriage

While the search was on for the right man for Devaki, the relations between Chinnamma and Appu were becoming more and more acrimonious. One day, Appu walked out of the house, married a woman in his father's village and decided to stay with her. His going away was a relief to the family in every way. Really, he was a drag on the family. And the house became much more peaceful thereafter.

Devaki's brother, Keshavan, had been working for sometime as a coolie in construction. During the course of his work, Keshavan met Thangappan who too had taken up a coolie job in construction after a short stint in the army. Thangappan also turned out to be a distant cousin. He was a tall, handsome man and was accepted by Chinnamma as the right match for Devaki. So the marriage was fixed after the horoscopes were matched. The understanding was that Thangappan would get a dowry of Rs.550 of which Rs.50 will be paid immediately and the rest when Chinnamma's finances improved.

The marriage rite consisted of the bridgroom giving her a gold bordered mundu in the presence of a caste functionary who registered the marriage at a SIDP office.[12] Appu, Devaki's father, did not come for the occasion.

After her wedding, Devaki moved with Thangappan to his house where she shared the hut with Thangappan's father, step-mother and their two grown up children. Thangappan's parents ran a small tea shop. Devaki helped in the kitchen, grinding or pounding rice and other materials for the snacks to be sold at the tea shop and washing the utensils. Frequently, the question of the outstanding dowry would crop up and the mother-in-law would make unpleasant comments. She got used to it gradually.

The birth of a son

About two years after the marriage, Devaki was expecting her first child. She went to her mother's house for the confinement. She did not go to any hospital for delivery. A village mid wife attended on her and Chinnamma met the expenses. A son was born to her. When the child was four months old, Devaki returned to her husband's house.

On her return to Thangappan's house, however, Devaki sensed strong hostility towards her. "Why should we support you and your son when your mother does not pay up the dowry money?" Thangappan was on his paranet's side. She could sense clearly the change in the wind. She could no longer depend on Thangappan for her maintenance. Even if she went back to her mother's house, she would have to go out to work.

Her decision to work

Devaki decided to go out for coolie work at the site of a nearby dam under construction. Thangappan and even her brother, Keshavan, had a job already at the same site. There was work for all those who were willing to work.

This was a major decision for Devaki. Being a weaver, she had been a skilled worker. Also, though her brother had already taken to a coolie job, she had not been forced to do that. She could not defer it any longer.[13]

Though Devaki had started going out to work to pay for her own keep, neither the frequency nor the intensity of quarrels at home was actually reduced. One day, when her son was ten months old, she had a big heated argument and she went back with the son to her mother's house, never to return as it turned out. Thangappan did go after some days, to take her back to his house but ended up staying there. Stillhe never got quite reconciled to forgetting about the outstanding dowry money. So the matter came up once in a while,

ending up always in a big argument after which he would go away for some days. Quarrels would always end up in Devaki getting a few blows. Thus Thangappan was constantly coming and going. After a gap of some years, Devaki had her second child. It was a girl. Again, she did not go to a hospital for delivery. For almost six years now, Devaki had been staying in her mother's house with Thangappan visiting her on and off.

Thangappan, who was all along doing coolie work on one site or another, did contribute towards the running of Devaki's kitchen, on the days he was there but only after he had paid for his meals, which he took outside, and had kept some money for his pocket expenses. The balance left with him to give Devaki was just enough to pay his keep. Minding, feeding, and clothing their two children were therefore Devaki's responsibility entirely. Not that Thangappan's behaviour in this regard was particularly unusual, for this seems to be the pattern in practically every other household belonging to this income-cum-occupational group but Thangappan always carried a chip on his shoulder for doing even this much. "After all, hasn't the old woman gone back on her solemn vow to pay me for marrying Devaki?" He felt that he was tricked into marrying Devaki by her brother. He complained that if he had that money he could have put up a hut and stayed independently from his parents. Then Devaki learnt that he was going around with an other woman with whom he came in contact when she was expecting the second child. She recalls how he would not come home for several nights. Again, Devaki herself concedes, in retrospect, that it has happened to many women of her class that their husbands make fresh alliances during the months immediately before and after their deliveries. The fact remains that Devaki then felt very upset about it.

The birth of second daughter

When Vimala, the little girl, was around two years old, Thangappan altogether stopped coming and was away from the scene for almost eight years. [illegible] Devaki was [illegible] the fact that she was staying with her own [illegible] source of great support, moral as well as emotional, to her. She heard

the news that Thangappan was living with a woman in his father's house, but there was little that she could do about it. She took it that he had deserted her for good. Suddenly, one day, Thangappan, reappeared. Actually, Thangappan had got the news that Chinnamma had been in luck, having just inherited some 25 cents of land in Balaramapuram. This land was being acquired by a Government spinning mill and she was due to receive compensation for that any day. He thought he should renew his claim. According to Devaki, she did not quite see his game first. She thought he was genuine in wanting to get back to her and her children. Within a few months, however, it was clear what he had really come for. Devaki's pride was badly hurt and she decided not to have anything to do with Thangappan and sent him away. In the meanwhile, however, she had already conceived once again.

Devaki's third child, however, has been a juicy topic for gossip for her neighbourhood and relatives who do not believe that the girl was fathered by Thangappan. Some attribute the child to one of Devaki's co-workers and some to a cousin. Evidently, she had an affair or two during that long absence of Thangappan. Devaki herself is not unaware of the doubts cast on her third child's fatherhood but she sticks emphatically to her story.

Devaki's embarrassment was only that the child was born when her son, Chandran, was already fourteen years old.

Devaki had heard about the family planning programme. She wishes she had undergone sterilisation before Thangappan's reappearance. So when the time came for delivery she decided to go to the hospital, to get herself sterilised straight after delivery. She had never been to a hospital for delivery before and had no clue to what it was to undergo surgery. However, she couldn't care less. She was prepared to go through anything to put a permanent end to this business of having children.

Her move to the squatter colony

Even before Vasanthi, the third child, was born to Devaki, some other important developments had occured in her family. Her second brother, Vasudevan, after completing his school reasonably well had gone away on some sort of State scholarship to Poona to learn printing. Her first brother, Keshavan, who had stayed unmarried so far to help them, fell in love and married a Tamil coolie girl he met while doing some stretch of road construction. Also, the girl's parents managed to get him on the payroll of a clay factory in the outskirts of Trivandrum city. So he decided to put up a hut for himself and his wife near the factory. Her sister, Sreekala, who was expecting her second child, had been deserted by her husband.

The household now consisted of three deserted women, two of them with small children to bring up. Chinnamma wanted to move close to where her son, Keshavan was staying. So all the three women decided to move there. The idea was that they could be all under the protective wings of Keshavan. That would give them a sense of security.[14] Also, there probably would be more and better paid construction work near the city. With part of the money she got for her recently inherited land, they bought two adjacent plots, one for Chinnamma, Sreekala and her two kids and the other for Devaki, and her children. The land really belonged to the Government. So the people selling these plots were only giving up their right to squatting thereon for the money they were paid.

All these years, Devaki had been living in more or less communal neighbourhoods where houses were spread out. Now she had moved to a neighbourhood where there were people from various castes and houses were located in one cluster. Her neighbours were mostly casual workers. A few of these were carpenters and masons who got a wage higher than unskilled workers and also were employed more regularly. So their wives generally did not go out to work. In all other households, even old women had to go out to work to eke out some livelihood.

The hut on Devaki's five - cent piece of land consisted of just one big room, 15 feet by 12 feet with a square courtyard in front. She set up her kitchen in one corner of the room and used the rest as her living-cum-bed room. The main road was about 20 short steep steps above Devaki's hut and that lent it some measure of privacy from the public. Though an hourly bus service passed the squatter settlement and connected it with the town, the residents of the settlement seldom used it. They preferred to walk cross-country through the paddy fields and save money.

Coolie work

Devaki has been working for the last 21 years as a coolie woman for the construction industry. She has, in this period, worked at various sites, helping build roads, dams, bridges, and government and residential buildings.[15] The nature and the method of work have, however, been the same over all these years.

Work, on any construction site, can be devided into skilled work and unskilled work. While skilled work requires some previous training either in a formal school or on job, for unskilled work one needs strength and physical stamina. Still, while skilled workers are invariably men, women in this industry are always unskilled workers. On any construction site, there are always several men also doing unskilled work along with women; often such men outnumber women. While the male workers may someday graduate to skilled work, none of the female workers can ever aspire to improve their position. They are doomed to remain unskilled workers.[16]

At any one time, the proportion of the skilled and unskilled workers differs from site to site depending largely upon the stage of construction. One important reason why the proportion of women may differ from site to site is that the proportion of unskilled hands needed is not the same on every site. But this need not be the only reason. Some contractors or their mistries (the principal masons) would rather have only men working with them. This sex bias, according to Devaki, plays quite an important role in determing the proportion of women at different construction sites.

Job information and opportunities

Devaki usually gets information about work possibilities from other workers who already have job on a site. Very often, the mistri sends word around in the area where he himself, his relatives and friends live.[17] He can thus oblige friends and relatives. Also, he sends word to persons who have worked for him before, to his satisfaction, of course. Here, being Ezhava by caste can also be of quite a help. Traditionally, a considerable number of Ezhava men work for construction industry. Usually, an Ezhava mistri prefers workers of his own caste. They are much more submissive to him. Also, tension is less among workers drawn from the same caste. At least one major factor that creates groups among workers is thereby eliminated. Moreover, on a construction site there is a great deal of community eating. Sometimes the workers cook their own food, if tea shops are far away from the construction site. Then it helps if the workers are not drawn from different castes. There is the additional factor that persons from the other caste group (viz. Pulayas), who usually takes up coolie work on a construction site, have first preferance always for work in the paddy fields. So they cannot be depended upon to come for construction work regularly.

Seasonality of work

Construction, being very-largely an open air activity, does not offer the same number of employment oppottunities all round the year. Construction activity during the monsoons comes to a frequent halt. Then there are other wet days during the course of a year when there can be no work.[18] If it is raining in the early morning you are sent back. If it rains before lunch, you get paid for half a day. During the six months extending from December to May, construction activity is usually in full swing except when some shortage, particularly of cement, virtually brings all work to a halt.

Women and construction work

Since there are always more women looking for work than can be employed, the fortunate ones expose themselves to accusations of immoral relationships. Usually, women accuse women. Those who get work less regularly accuse those who get it on a more regular basis. You learn to ignore such accusations. An element of truth is probably there in these accusations, considering the frequency with which men in construction move into new sex alliances. Devaki herself tells about several women who got entangled with men while working. "It is very hard not to get involved", philosophises Devaki.

How is it that inspite of the risks it carries there are always more women looking for jobs in construction than can be absorbed? Go to any road crossing early in the morning and you can see several women, along with men, waiting to be asked by some Mistri or contractor's agent to go to work.

Devaki has no doubt that the risk women take is real. One can easily spoil one's reputation with not only the husband but also the family and in the neighbourhood. If still some women go for construction work, it is because circumstances compel them. No parent will send young unmarried girls to construction work, if it can be avoided. Devaki herself is quite aware of these risks and is determined that she will never let her own daughters take up this work. Most young married women also shy away from a construction site. So do even grown up women. Not only is the work more strenuous but also the whole behaviour pattern on the work site is not conducive to one's self respect especially for women. All these women looking for construction work, says Devaki, must be really hard up for money. The younger the woman the more hard up she must be to be driven here. Of course, once you go along you start taking things in your stride.

Work at the site

Devaki, like every one, has to present herself to the Mistri, at the work site, a good fifteen minutes before 8 O'clock because work starts on time. The Mistri's first job is to assign work to everyone and see that the work starts without delay. Immediately, Devaki changes into her work clothes, which she carries in a small bundle. There is always a corner that women can go into and change their clothes. Usually, this means changing one's lungi, the wrap around skirt, and tying a piece of old cloth as scarf around your head. The flowing part of this head scarf serves also to protect the blouse and cover the breasts. While women younger than her are particular that breasts are covered, Devaki is more concerned about protecting her hair. She regards wearing the head scarf as a must.

When she actually does any head load carrying, Devaki places on her head an old rag, nicely twisted into a coil, to provide a cushion and ties it securely on the head with a string so that it keeps in place.

Carrying of granite rocks

Carrying granite rocks on head is possibly the hardest and most hazardous of female jobs in construction. Normally, each piece of rock weighs between 35 to 40 kilos. There is always a man who lifts the rock and places it on the woman's head. The man has to use his judgement to make sure that no rock is too heavy to carry.[19] When it is heavy he is supposed to break it into the right size with a hammer. Usually, if the place of unloading is within a radius of 10 feet the woman may have to carry a heavier rock. Over longer distances, however, she is made to carry only smaller weights. The maximum load a woman can carry at a time is 50 kilos. On an average, she transports around one ton a day unless the distances are very long.

While loading the rock on a woman's head is done by a man, unloading of the rock has to be done by the women themselves. It is believed that lifting a weight needs more thrust and effort then

carrying it on one's head. For unloading, all that Devaki has to do is to slightly bend her head forward and let the stone go with a slight push with her hands. She must do this carefully, however, and not let it fall on her feet. Also, if there are other rocks already on the ground she must avoid them because the splinters can be quite dangerous.

Carrying of bricks

The job that lasts the longest and covers a good number of days in construction is that of carrying burnt bricks. These Devaki, like other women, can herself load and unload. Ordinarily, she carries only 16 bricks at a time but the number varies depending upon the terrain and distance to be covered. Sometimes, when a job has to be completed in a rush some men would be put on the job of loading bricks on women's heads. Then they have to carry 20 bricks at a time.

In order to carry bricks, Devaki uses a wooden plank, about two feet long and six inches wide. This plank is placed on top of the coiled rag. The bricks rest on this plank making four rows of four, and sometimes even five, bricks.

Carrying bricks is also quite a hard job because the strain is all on the worker's neck and back. In a normal day, Devaki can transport four hundred bricks. The actual number depends on where the truck unloads the bricks and the distance over which she has to carry them.

If the bricks are to be used immediately for the purpose of building the walls, they have to be soaked well in water before use. All construction sites have a small water tank for this and other purposes. Very often, when the masons are working on the upper floor of a building, one of the women is assigned the job of throwing up soaked bricks one by one, to a man standing on the upper floor. It needs quite a bit of practice to throw the bricks in this way.

Cement concreting

Cement concrete is a mixture of rubble, sand, cement and water. Usually, while the mixing is done by men, women's job is to transport the mixture in basins. Sometimes, they form a sort of human conveyor belt for the purpose and sometimes they carry it individually. A concreting job taken up in the morning has got to be completed on the same day. Therefore, work may have to go on even after dusk. Handling cement mixture for long hours causes blisters on hands and feet. However, not even gunny rags are provided to cover one's hands and feet. If some workers want to cover their feet they must bring their own gunny rags. Devaki does not mind either the extra hazards or the long hours because she earns three to four rupees extra on a concreting day. This is, therefore, the day when she can put aside a few rupees.

On the day of concreting, women workers are employed in a relatively larger proportion because firstly a considerable amount of head load carrying has to be done within a short span of time and secondly extra female hands are easy to mobilise for the purpose. Usually, the mistri sends word in advance with his masons and workers to their neighbourhoods and thereby ensures that enough additional hands are available on such a day.

Wages and sex discrimination

Workers get their wages in cash after they finish their day's work. Women workers have to clean and wash all the working equipment like the tin basins spades, trowels and other gadgets used by the masons and other workers and put them away in a safe place. Very often, the finished part of the building is also swept by women before they go home. Usually, women stand aside in a group separate from men to collect their wages from the mistri.

If, as is usual, the workers are recruited through a contractor or the mistri, workers have to give him a small cut from their daily wages. For the past few years however, Devaki has been [illegible]

site where she has not had to give cuts. Construction on this site is being done by an educational institution without the intermediation of contractors and the Mistri is under strict instructions not to take any cut from the worker's daily wage.

The current daily wage in construction is eight rupees for women and 10 rupees for men. The rates were seven and nine rupees respectively last year. When Devaki started work some twenty years back, the wage was two rupees for women and three rupees for men. The differentiation in wage rates, based on sex was always there, though the relative differential can be said to be lower today than when Devaki started working for construction industry.[20]

Do women put in less hard work than unskilled men? It is true that in construction women are seldom asked to do certain jobs, like digging of earth, breaking of big rocks, lifting of weights from the ground, or mixing of cement, sand and rubble. On almost every site, however, you will see men also carrying bricks, stones, sand and cement mix on their heads. Nobody really claims that men transport larger quantities than women. Still these men get paid a higher daily wage than women.[21]

Even between skilled work and unskilled work, the latter is far more exhausting and strenous. Though the masons shoulder a greater responsibility, this work carries less physical risk and they spend less energy as compared to men and women who do head-load carrying. The masons are either standing or sitting in one place laying stones or bricks, plastering or concreting, while all the things are brought to them.

Since women accept a lower wage than men, are they preferred over men, at least for head load transporting? Devaki's answer is a mixture of yes and no. Usually, they do ask for women when there is a lot of head load carrying to do. The reason for preferring women is that apart from their wages being low, they take instructions more seriously, are subservient and waste less time smoking bidis or chit chatting. A stern word or two is enough to discipline th

Neverthless, some masons prefer to do away with female labour completely except for cement concreting. Having women on the site means giving more scope for quarrels and misunderstanding. Normally, women are always more anxious than men to stop work and get back home early. The opinion is divided however, but by and large most construction sites do have women working side by side with men. It is in the proportion of women to men, given the category of work, that the bias of the contractor or mistri is reflected.

Moods at work

When construction work is in full swing, the atmosphere is quite tense. Masons tend to be bossy and are always pulling up unskilled workers. Sometimes, when one of them exceeds the limit, a worker or two may protest. Of course in a conflict with a mason the workers are always at a disadvantage and lose in the end. More often, there are quarrels between workers, when a worker close to the mistri or a mason tries to lord it over others. Not seldom, however, a quarrel starts with a trivial joke or comment which may be meant only to liven up the atmosphere.

Sometimes, a quarrel flares up over women workers. Devaki has learned, over the years, how to keep away from trouble but younger women have to learn from experience how to ignore frivolous remarks and gestures, all of which may not be quite innocent.

As far as possible, where both husband and wife are construction workers they try not to work on the same site. Even a brother would prefer not to work on the same site as his sister. When two sisters have work on the same site, as for example, is the case sometimes with Devaki and Sreekala, even they do not feel quite comfortable.[22] Devaki at least often feels embarrassed when [illegible] passing remarks on Sreekala but she knows that Sreekala can be quite flirtatious in her behaviour with men.

When work is under the open sky, liberties taken are mostly verbal in the form of small jokes. Usually, a young woman is the

butt of all jokes, with a relatively older woman adding spicy comments. When work is inside a building, there is always a chance that some of the masons will try to take some physical liberties with the young women workers. Indeed, on every site one soon discovers those with such notoreity. Since it is all part of the game, workers do not pay much attention to these goings on but they do form the subject of a comment or two.

Accidents at work

While quarrels create divisions between them, accidents bring the workers together. Accidents take place on the construction sites from time to time, though it is still a wonder that, with hardly any safeguards, they are not more frequent and more serious.[23] When an accident does take place all the workers, regardless of skill and sex, flock to help. If it is a minor cut, someone just cleans it up, tears up a rag and bandages it. Devaki cannot, in her memory, recall even one construction site where a proper first aid kit was readily available. If it is a serious injury, the workers arrange to take the victim to the hospital. Usually, the mistri pays for the transportation out of the money kept in his charge. Also, the worker gets paid the full wage on the day of the accident. Thereafter, he or she fends for himself. If one is involved in a major accident, the other workers might even take a cut in their wages to enable the mistri to pay the victim an additional amount, which is seldom more than two day's wages, while one may be hospitalised for days and remain out of work for weeks thereafter. Also, there is no guarantee that one will be taken back on work when one is fit enough.

Devaki's recent accidents

For the past three-four years, Devaki has been largely on a work site about one and a half kilometres from the squatter settlement where she lives. A new campus of an educational institution was coming up and there was plenty of construction work on most days except when work had to stop because of either rain or shortage of cement.

But Devaki had to stay away from work at least twice for long spells because of accidents in which she hereself was involved.

Devaki's first accident took place when a foundation was being laid. A granite stone had just been placed on her head. Apart from the man whose job it was to place stones on heads of women, there were a few others busy breaking bigger rocks, with hammers. The terrain was hilly and uneven and as Devaki started moving down the slope, a hammer came from nowhere and hit her on the chest. It had slipped from the hands of one of the men and flown towards her. She fell down instantly. Luckily, the stone she was carrying fell away from her. All the workers came running to her. Seeing that she was unconscious, it was decided that she should be taken to the hospital immediately. Some four or five workers went with her to the hospital in the institute's car. Devaki had come round by the time they reached the hospital. Though she had been hit hard, there was no fracture. So she was sent home. It took her a week to recover and get back to work. The Mistri paid her full wage not only for the day of the accident but also for the next day.

The Mistri took her back on the job, the moment Devaki was fit enough. However, even to this day, i.e. after four years, Devaki complains that she gets pain in the chest while carrying heavy loads. Almost a year after that, Devaki had another accident. This accident almost changed her life. One of the new cottages on the campus was being got ready for occupation by a visiting scholar from abroad who had already arrived with his family. Some last minute additions had to be made urgently to meet the family's requirements. It was a rather hot day. Devaki had carried bricks the whole morning, twenty at a time. Around mid-day, i.e. just before the lunch break, when she brought in a fresh load of bricks and unloaded them close to where the mason was putting up a platform, she somehow felt so giddy that before anyone knew what was happening she fainted and fell down.

The foreign couple happened to be on the scene. Immediately, they took her to a nearby private clinic, bought her medicines and took her home. They kept visiting her thereafter and paying not only for her medicines but also for her keep. According to the doctor, Devaki was too weak to do heavy work and should stay home and take rest for a month. When she was ready to resume work, the mistri was prepared to take her back, but the foreign couple asked her if she would rather do domestic work for them, for the next eight or nine months of their stay in the country. They felt that the relatively light domestic work would help Devaki recover and regain health. Devaki was rather reluctant. Wages for domestic work were very low and the working hours long. The current monthly wage for full-time domestic work was 25 rupees plus two meals a day and a set of new clothing once a year during Onam, apart from a set of working clothes. As a woman with a family of three to support, she could not think of switching over to domestic work, even if it meant regular indoor employment. Moreover, she had no clue about what it was to work for a European household. Also she could hardly understand a word of English. So she felt she would have problems in communicating with the foreign couple and their two children. She was quite surprised when they offered to pay her the same daily wage as she was getting at the construction site and also allow her to take Sundays off. Being very intelligent, Devaki picked up housework in no time and started to understand English. Housework was a child's play compared to the hard work in construction.

The effects of a regular job

Eight months of regular employment with the foreign family made a difference to Devaki in many ways. Not only was her job assured day after day, there were also a number of fringe benefits that she enjoyed over and above the wage she got. They gave her work clothes free. She could do her personal laundry and take a bath in their house, both luxuries as far as she was concerned. She did not have to spend on soap and oil for herself. Also her morning and evening tea was provided for. The [illegible]

bottles and cans were hers to take and sell. This brief interlude of relative properity, thanks to a regular job combined with a number of extras, changed Devaki's life style.

First, her clothes became much better and cleaner. Not only did she got a few new clothes but also she washed them better and more frequently. Secondly, she bought food items regularly and in sufficient quantities so that she and the children could eat better. Thirdly, she could use a portion of her daily wage to buy a few new clothes for the children. Until then, it was always a matter of just managing to survive. Even in the best months, i.e. when she was most regularly employed, there was little that she could save because she had always some outstanding account to settle with the grocery or the cloth shop.

Though naturally happy, she was constantly dreading the prospect of having to go back to construction work one day. She knew all along that her foreign employers were there for a limited period. However, when the time came for the first foreign family to leave, another foreign family came to stay in the neighbourhood and on the recommendation of the former Devaki got the job on the same terms for the next year.

Improvements in the hut

It was when she was working for the second family that Devaki slowly started collecting bricks to put up a partition in her one-room shack. Every Sunday she would get some clay from the paddy fields and her neighbour who works for a brick kiln helped her mould it into bricks. She would let the bricks dry in the sun and then stack them inside her hut. She needed seven hundred bricks to put up the partition wall. Just before Christmas, the family she had worked for first sent her some 150 rupees through a bank. Devaki was naturally overjoyed. She used the money to buy a door and hire a mason and a few workers and put up the partition wall. Thus while she herself saved in the form very largely of collecting clay on Sundays and moulding them into bricks external assistance enabled

her to finance her other costs of putting up the partition and having two rooms instead of one.

The second family took Devaki for a month to an outstation, some 375 kilometers away. Devaki could take her little daughter, Vasanthi, with her. On her return, they gave her an extra 200 rupees. With this money, Devaki redid the thatched roof of her house, put up a new latch to the door and brought a lock with keys. Thus, practically the whole of her temporary income was invested by Devaki in her hut.

Devaki's neighbours in the squatter settlement did not react quite favourably to the turn in Devaki's fortune. There was back biting about her having sexual relationship with the gentleman of the family she was working for. This, however, is a common accusation against all women workers in the settlement, the moment they have a little extra money. Evidently, people take note when someone among them has visibly improved her/his economic position. In Devaki's case, the outward signs of her new prosperity could not be missed by anyone.

Not only her neighbours in the squatter settlement but also her former co-workers in construction, including the masons she had worked for, did not take very kindly to Devaki's demonstration of prosperity. They felt she had become proud, though Devaki does not think that she had changed at all in her dealings with her neighbours and former co-workers.

She wore better clothes to work because her employers expected this of her. They had given her two outfits for that purpose. True, also, all her children wore better clothes, but then never before had she been able to buy a set of new clothes for them at the same time in the past. Possibly, her conversation now [illegible] air of superiority. She knew now how to use a gas stove, iron clothes, use the refrigerator and the usual gadgets that a western household uses in India. May be, when she spoke of these, her neighbours thought that

she was showing off. Possibly also, the feeling of security had made her look more reassured in her bearing. But, according to Devaki, she was always quite aware that her job as a domestic was not permanent and that sooner or later she would have to get back to her old work in construction.

Re-entry into construction work

Indeed, the thought that nagged all through the 20 months of being a domestic servant was of how she would return to her old work. Already, she was well beyond forty and in construction, age matters a lot very soon. Even though you may be willing to work, and can work, the nistri may not employ you if he considers you too old.[24] There are always so many younger women looking for work. So Devaki's immediate problem would be to gain a re-entry into construction work. Will a nistri re-employ her? There was no question, therefore, of her ever wanting to annoy, by any of her actions, her old nistri and co-workers, during the course of her job with the foreign families. Indeed, she always tried to maintain contact with her old nistri and co-workers.

The fact remains, however, that when the day finally arrived, gaining re-entry into construction work was not very easy. The first day Devaki went to the old site, the mistri in charge would not even look at her. "Come next week. But I don't promise any work. I cannot throw out those who have already been working." This was his ultimate response. When Devaki got someone in the institute to speak to the mistri, she got work just for one day. The mistri took her off the job the following day saying she had become too slow and quarrelsome. Her co-workers also showed a certain amount of hostility. Their comments were: "You do not need to work. Your foreign friends will send you money. So why are you worried about it?" Devaki, of course, reacted strongly to all this. She told the mistri that he was having only his favourite women on the site, that he really wanted a cut from her and that she would try to expose him about all the pilferage that he does from the site.

Finally, she had to move to an entirely new site. It took Devaki several months to regain the confidence of her mistri and co-workers. Only then was she reasonably sure of getting work regularly (or less irregularly because in construction workers know of nothing like work security).

When Devaki looks back to her work as a domestic, she is happy that it did not last long. The longer she would have stayed as a domestic, the more difficult it would have been for her to gain re-entry into construction. Also her body would have found it more difficult to re-adjust to heavy work. And still there was no question of her taking to domestic work on a permanent basis, because only a couple of foreign families had been prepared to pay her so much more than what an average local family would. May be she would turn to domestic work when she nears fifty and is unable to do heavy work any more, unless Chandran starts working regularly to be able to run the family entirely on his own.

Job for the son

Devaki has always been worried about Chandran. What type of work will be take up? What type of people does he mix with? What type of girl will he marry? Before Devaki moved to the squatter settlement and set up a house of her own, both Chandran and Vimala, two of her three children, were going to school. Now, she needed Vimala to stay at home and look after the baby girl and also to attend to household chores, particularly when Devaki herself would be out at work. Her most difficult decision at that time, however, was to stop Chandran from school. She had hoped that Chandran would complete school and then go to a trade school and learn some skill. Though Chandran was doing reasonably well at school and would have completed it in another two years, she asked him to discontinue his studies because (a) she could not afford to meet his school expenses, whatever they were, even though he did not have to pay any tuition fees, (b) she badly needed him to supplement the family income and (c) she was not certain that a few years of more schooling would improve his employment prospects.

Chandran was grown up enough to understand his mother's problems. So he started going out to look for work but work was not easy to come by for him, not even coolie work. Devaki would not ask the Mistri she was working for to give Chandran work. "In construction work, this should never be done", is her straight explanation. So she sent Chandran to her brother, living six-seven kilometres away, to see if he could get work in that neighbourhood. In one of the State-owned factories there, she had heard, it was possible to get work for a day or two every week on a casual basis, provided someone spoke on your behalf. This, Chandran's uncle arranged for him. So he got work once or, at the most, twice a week there.

Then Devaki's second brother, who stays in Poona with his Maharashtrian wife and children, came home, by himself, to visit his mother, brother and sisters. He left a hundred rupees with Devaki to put Chandran through driving school. Chandran learnt

driving and got the car driving licence, but he never acquired enough self confidence to apply for a driver's job. The result was that he still had to look for a coolie job. The investment made in training him as a driver is as good as lost.

Prayers and bribery

Devaki's constant prayer now is that Chandran should one day get a regular, better paid job as a factory coolie. She spent Rs.10 to get a horoscope cast for Chandran and since it did not turn out to be so hopeful, she has to spend a lot more money pacifying the gods. Also she has taken a vow to fast every Sunday when breakfast is the only food she takes after a head bath and prayers. For the prayers she lights an oil lamp after thoroughly cleaning her house and front yard. She does not eat any left over or non-vegetarian food. She does not know many prayers but just says the Rama Namam. Chandran is always reminding her to pray silently and not to create a scene. His argument is that gods can hear her even if she prays softly. She, however, ignores his pleas and does as she likes and has kept this vow for the last two years. Both Devaki and Chandran know this however that he can get the coolie job in the factory only if the trade union leader is bribed. The bribe is said to be Rs.3,000 of which Rs.2,500 has to be paid cash down. The rest has to be paid in instalments spread over a year once the job is in hand.

So Devaki's preoccupation lately has been to get together the money for the bribe. She even toyed with the idea of selling her house for Rs.1,000 and Vimala's gold chain for Rs.300. Luckily, no one was willing to take her house and land at her price. She tried for loans with a couple of friends but the amount was too big for anyone to lend. Finally, she wrote to one of the two foreign ladies she had worked for as a domestic and much to her surprise she received Rs.2,000 from them through a bank. Devaki has left the money with the bank in a saving account in her name. In order to make up the balance of Rs.500, Devaki's brother has agreed to lend her the money.

Her future plans

Devaki's calculations are that once Chandran gets the job she can sell off her present hut and move out of the squatter settlement to a neighbourhood near the factory, where he would be employed. In fact, since her brother is also staying in the vicinity of that factory she plans to put up a thatched hutment near her brother's house. Life will be a little hard to start with since she will have to save up enough to pay the trade union leader, in the course of one year, another Rs.2500. Then to marry off Vimala she will have to pay some dowry. "So I too will have to keep working for the next few years. But I can then look forward to better days."

Devaki believes that the whole future of the family depends on Chandran getting a job as a regular factory labourer. Also she wants immediately to move out of the squatter settlement. She is convinced that her present neighbourhood exercises a bad influence on her children.

Chandran might easily get initiated into drinking and smoking. Also, he might get involved with one of the girls in the neighbourhood, who according to her are constantly on the look out for young men whom they could marry without dowry. Devaki's bigger worry has been that Vimala should not get involved with any of the young men loitering about without work in the neighbourhood. Afterall, most marriages that she has seen in this neighbourhood have been the consequence of pre-marital alliances. Devaki is firm that her Vimala must have a proper marriage.

What about Chandran's marriage? Devaki is in no hurry. Not for the next five-years. First, it will have to be Vimala's turn. Devaki would look for a young man in the factory where Chandran hopes to get a job. Chandran agrees with Devaki's priorities.

Chandran agrees fully with his mother that even if he is able to get work in construction with as much regularity (or [illegible]) as anyone else, still he should try to get into a regular factory job which carried better pay and security. In construction, one can never

get work for more than 240 days in a year and the maximum he can earn in a year, at the current wage rate for unskilled male workers, is only Rs.2,400. It will take him years, may be 10 and that too if he is lucky, to graduate into a mason, provided a nistri takes special interest in him. It is mostly sons and close relatives of masons who have access to the apprenticeship necessary to become full fledged masons. On the other hand, in the factory he will get work all the year round, including bonus and other benefits. True he has to pay upRs.5,000 under the table to get the factory job but that doesn't bother him because he will be able to recover the amount in two years. Thereafter, he and his mother can devote all their earnings to the family's uplift.

On marriage also, Chandran fully agrees with his mother that Vimala, though younger, should marry before him. They want to find for Vimala a boy with a factory job. Chandran is clear in his mind that his own marriage can wait for quite some years. He is aware of his mother's fears of his possible involvement with some girl in the squatter settlement but considers them somewhat exaggerated. However, he shares fully his mothers concern that Vimala has to be sheltered from the possible advances of the younger men in the settlement, some of whom might try to entice her knowing that Devaki is in some money now. Indeed, according to Devaki's neighbours, Vimala is under very close surveillance and she does not exchange a word with any young man around. The story is that some months back when Vimala was reported to have been seen talking to a young man, Devaki beat her up and rebuked her so severely that the girl attempted suicide by eating some poisonous herb. Chandran doesn't quite deny the whole story but considers it rather exaggerated.

The growing up daughter

Vimala also refuses to divulge the truth. She fully endorses the view of her mother that the earlier they can get out of the squatter settlement the better would it be for all of them. Devaki

is not on the best of terms with her neighbours. In fact ever since she got the job as a domestic, the neighbours resent Devaki's presence in their midst. Is it because they don't like any household living better than the rest? It cannot be that. In the settlement there already live a number of carpenters and masons. They are definitely better off them most. But they get along well with the neighbours. "Perhaps they don't like us doing better", is Vimala's explanation. In the squatter settlement, neighbours evaluate and observe each other's progress very minutely and jealousies are a common part of the culture here. Vimala is quick to add however that her mother never quite liked the neighbourhood from the very first day they moved in.

Vimala has a number of other reasons, may be stronger, not to want to stay on in the settlement. Since the day they moved in, Vimala's job has been to attend to the household chores. Before she attained puberty, she could walk across the settlement into the nearby bush, first in the morning for purposes of toilet and later in the day to collect dry twigs. She could walk down the hill to her grandmother's house. Now, Devaki has put a stop to all this so that Vimala has minimal chances of mixing with the people in the settlement.

Devaki put up a toilet next to the hut. A social work team was distributing toilet slabs on a nominal price to all the squatter houses which would put up toilets of their own. Devaki tried also to dig her own well. Unfortunately, after a month of digging no water was struck and the project had to be given up. If she could have had the well, then neither she herself nor Vimala would have to walk to the public tap to fetch drinking water.

Whether or not she is occupied inside the house, cooking, sweeping or what not, the mother's strict instructions to Vimal are not to go out, not even in their own front yard, when Devaki and Chandran are out at work. [illegible] a prisoner in her own house. In any other neighbourhood, she feels, she could have had much greater freedom to move, and may probably right.

What about the household chores she has to attend to? Vimala does not think she is being over-worked at all. It is Devaki who gets up first in the morning and fetches water from the public tap which is some ten minutes walk from their hut. She also sweeps the front countryard and washes the steps of the entrance. Only then does she wake up Vimala. By the time Vimala gets up, brushes her teeth with a black powder made out of burnt rice husks, cleans her tongue with a small coconut twig and has a wash near the banana tree at the back of the house, Devaki has rolled up the four grass mats and put them away along with the three pillows on a wooden bench. Vimala helps Devaki rewash the vessels that were cleaned in the night with a mixture of ash and mud. They never leave pots and pans dirty in the night. Devaki herself serves a major portion of the kanji and fish curry, left over from the previous night, first to Chandran for breakfast and then only sits down to eat her own breakfast. Vimala takes her breakfast later but the mother is always careful to leave enough for both her and Vasanthi.

After Chandran and Devaki leave the house, first to the tea shop and then for work, Vimala has to get Vasanthi ready for school. Once Vasanthi has left for school, the major tasks left for Vimala to do are to clean the breakfast vessels and to cook 1½ kilos of rice and one kilo of tapioca for the family and to do some washing. She usually does the cooking around noon, so that she herself can take out a portion thereof and also for Vasanthi when she returns from school, in the afternoon. Vasanthi was not getting her mid-day meal at school for some time but has now started getting it. When she comes back from school, she has a small meal of tapioca and rice.

Vimala has usually little work to do in the afternoons. Chinnamma, her grandmother, often comes up to spend an hour or two with her. Only when Devaki and Chandran get back from work, does Vimala have to prepare tea or coffee which all share. Thereafter, Devaki, more or less, takes over. So Vimala does not consider herself discriminated against with regard to either work or food.

If Chandran gets any special attention in the matter of food, they feels that he richly deserves it. Vimala has obviously been brainwashed in this regard. Like Devaki, she too thinks that as the man of the house, and now a full earner, Chandran takes precedence over all others, including the mother. According to Vimala, if any one in their house is really underfed, it is Devaki because she is always concerned about whether there is enough for both Vimala and Vasanthi after she has served Chandran. Devaki herself eats less but makes certain that Vimala and Vasanthi eat properly.

The evening meal

Devaki does the cooking for the evening meal soon after she has had her bath and washed her hair. There is a very small natural spring, three feet by three feet, at the foot hill. After applying some oil at home she goes down the hill carrying an aluminium mug, a piece of soap and a change of clothes. She uses the same soap for washing her body as well as her clothes. In the meantime, Vimala would have cleaned the fish, ground the spices into a smooth paste and cut the vegetables. Devaki cooks the fish and vegetables into two curries to be eaten with rice and tapioca already cooked by Vimala. As soon as dinner is ready, it is first served to Chandran and then to Vasanthi. Vimala and Devaki eat together. Usually, a quarter of the cooked food is left over for breakfast the following morning. That is how, Devaki is able to reduce to the minimum the need for Chandran and herself to eat out.

On Devaki's non-working days, she cooks tapioca in larger quantity, two instead of one kilos, in addition to the usual quantity of rice, and does not eat out at all. Sometimes when both she and Chandran are out of work she cooks 1½ lbs of rice in addition to two kilos of tapioca and serves a lunch of boiled tapioca, with salt and chilly powder added to taste, to the family. On such a day, even Chandran does not eat out.

Thus Devaki and her three children eat reasonably well on the day both Devaki and Chandran are working. Even on the days both are out of work she manages to cook food in quantities which are not really inadequate. The shortfall in intake, compared to the recommended norms, works out in no case to more than 10 percent. While Devaki stints on herself when she does not have enough cash she makes sure that for none of her children, not even the youngest, Vasanthi, is the shortfall very large.

Devaki is also in a position to buy a change of clothes for herself and children once a year. Once every two years, she is able to replace the thatched roof. All this she has done without getting into debt.

With both herself and Chandran now working and with some savings to fall back upon, day to day living is no problem for Devaki.

Her first and foremost preoccupation has been to secure a regular factory job for Chandran. That too appears to be within reasonable reach now, since she has put together the money for the first cash down payment for R.S.500. Devaki's brother has already made the necessary contact.

The prospect of leaving the squatter settlement, at long last, also looks quite realistic. She is prepared to put up with anything just to achieve that. Her children will then be safe from the "evil" influence of the present neighbourhood. How is she certain that Chandran will not drift away from her after he gets the factory job or that Vimala won't get involved with someone she won't approve of?

Not that she is unaware of these and other related uncertainties but Vimala as well as Chandran's conduct so far has given her no reason to suspect that things will not work out her way. In any case, she does not want to think that they won't. Vasanthi is too young to worry about right now. Devaki intends to keep her in school for a much longer period than Vimala if she can manage it. She however

feels that it hardly matters if she is in school for four years or eight years. According to her, when the time comes to marry her off, she will have to pay a good amount in dowry. As for her own old age, she observes: "My children, in particular my son, are my only guarantee. What else can I do to secure myself against the future."

Summary observations

Born into a family of weavers, working on their own account, Devaki learnt the trade as a child and grew up in it. But within a couple of years of her marriage, when her first child was born, she was obliged to earn her keep. Owing to the depressed state of the craft, she was forced into unskilled coolie work in the construction industry. And that is where she has stayed ever since, except for a brief interlude of work as a domestic servant with two foreign families.

Working as an unskilled hand on construction sites is both physically hazardous and socially disadvantageous for women and since there is never any chance for them to improve their skill or status, they are dependent on one mistri or the other to obtain another job once work concludes on one site.

While she was living with her mother, Devaki kept her son and daughter at school. But the moment she had to move to a squatter settlement near Trivandrum city and was on her own, both the children had to give up school, the son to supplement the mother's income and the daughter to look after the house and Devaki's third child born after a lapse of some eight years.

When she got the first windfall in the form of a hundred rupees from her second brother, Devaki immediately gave it to her son to learn car-driving hoping that he would improve his income and employment prospects. That did not work, however. Devaki's break came when she got the job as a domestic with two foreign families, one after another. A year-round job, with the same daily wage as in construction, instead of living from day to day of

uncertainty and never getting work for more than 240 days in a year, may not have changed her life style significantly, though some of her neighbours and friends are convinced that it did, but it raised her aspirations considerably.

Though both Devaki and her son are still working as unskilled hands in construction, she is determined first to get her son a factory job and next to move out of the squatter settlement. She has put aside some Rs.2,000 for the first instalment of the under-the-table payment, to be made as soon as the son gets his appointment card. Then she plans to move out of the squatter settlement so that her first daughter is safe from the evil eyes of the young unemployed men in the settlement, and her son from the advances of the young women there.

As for herself, Devaki knows that there are few more years of work in construction in front of her. She sees in the prospect of a factory job for her son her own economic security and her family's social security. And she has the tenacity to go to the extreme end to achieve her objective.

Notes and References

1. The construction industry covers a wide diversity of work and operations. Besides construction of buildings for residential, commercial and industrial uses, it also covers construction of roads, railways, airports, bridges dams irrigation canals and so on. In 1971, out of 21 lakh workers employed in the construction industry in the whole country 2.04 lakhs (i.e. 10 per cent) were women. In Kerala, however, while the total number of workers engaged in construction was 1.1 lakhs, only four thousand (i.e. 4 per cent) were women. The corresponding figures for Trivandrum district were 10 thousand and four hundred respectively. Going by our observation of the sex distribution of construction workers on various sites in Trivandrum district, the figure of women workers appears to us to be grossly under-stated. The explanation for this under-statement can possibly be traced, to some extent, to the common practice among women workers to move in and out of construction from agriculture.

2. During the reign of His Highness Visakham Tirunal, Maharajah of Travancore, in the latter part of the 19th century, weaver families were brought from Tirunelveli and settled in Neyyattinkara and Balaramapuram. This accounts for the fairly high concentration of the industry in those places. See Kerala Minimum Wages Committee for Handloom Industry, Report, 1959, p.5.

3. According to Father J.Puthenkulam, this practice of brothers sharing a wife derives from an old custom. Thus among the Ezhavas "when the female of the house was engaged with either of the brothers (who had her as a common wife), his knife was said to be hung up at the door of the apartment as a signal of its being occupied." See Marriage and Family in Kerala, (1977) p.121.

4. "The indigenous handloom industry began to languish and continued to decline with the advent of cheap mill made cloth. The Census returns practically show no increase in the number of persons following weaving as their principal means of livelihood. The number was 14,713 in 1921 and 14,636 in 1931." See T.K.Velu Pillai, Travancore State Manual, 1940, p.545.

5. It appears that the situation with respect to wages, particularly children's wages, did not improve for many years, for even in the fifties the wage of a child worker in weaving, according to the Kerala Minimum Wages Committee (1959), was [illegible] i.e. "A weaver's family which weaves dhotis and sarees on the lower counts usually earns a wage of Rs.1.50 per day. Not less than 50 of this, 75 n.p. goes legitimately as the weaver's wage and the remaining 75 n.p. has to be distributed among 3 or 4 persons, most of whom generally are children. In any case, not one of them can expect to earn more than 25 n.p. per day. This is a rather liberal estimate; in most places the margin for preparatory processes is only 1/3rd of the total wage. Thus even juvenile worker may not be able to earn more than 2 annas per day." See Report op.cit., p.16.

6. The Kozhikode Gazetteer (1962) notes that till very recently, polygamy was practiced by the Nairs and the Ezhavas. See A.Sreedhara Menon, Kerala District Gazetteers, Kozhikode, 1962, p.225.

7. Talikettukalyanam is a ceremony discribed by some writers as mock marriage to be performed before the girl attained puberty. The essential part of the ceremony was the tying of the tali (a small piece of gold attached to a string) round the neck of the girl by a male of the same or higher caste. The ceremony did not give the person who tied the tali round the neck of the girl any claim on the girl because the Talikettukalyanam was not a real marriage. In fact, it was common to conduct this ceremony in a family, once every ten years, and cover all the girls below 11 years, including the very young. See K.P.Padmanabha Menon, History of Kerala, V.III, p.311-312 and L.A.Krishna Iyer, Social History of Kerala, 1970, Vol.II, p.8.

8. Tirandukalyanam was the ceremony connected with the first menses of a girl. When a girl attained maturity there was regular festivity for full four days. See K.P.Padmanabha Menon, op.cit., p.312.

9. "Practice of Mantrawada, the practice of spells, was common among many Ezhavas and occasionally a patient was to be treated by a medical man and a practitioner of spells simultaneously". See V.Thomas Samuel, One Caste One Religion One God: A study of Sree Narayana Guru, 1977 p.32. Also see V.Nagam Aiya, Travancore State Manual, 1906, p.63.

10. "Malayali Hindus believed that evil spirits haunted the body of women in their periods. The haunting spirit of puberty and menses was called 'Chettathi' ..... Chettathi forbod the evil and the inauspicious, and was a portent of danger. So the girl in menses kept an iron knife by her side to ward off danger. All the purificatory rites were for guarding the girl from the attack of evil spirits and for evicting the Chettathi from her body,," See Marriage and Family in Kerala, op.cit., p.56.

11. Dowry was absent among Ezhavas in olden days. In fact, the bridegroom had to give a nominal amount to the girls' father as bride price. But that custom has changed and dowry is becoming more and more common now.

12. S.N.D.P. stands for Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, the Society for the propogation of the moral teaching of Sri Narayana, a modern religious leader of the Ezhavas.

13. Migration of skilled labour from the handloom industry to various more gainful occupations must have proceeded at the same pace as the degeneration of the industry which occurred during the post war years. See Kerala Minimum Wages Committee for Handloom Industry, Report, 1959, p.8.

14. Kathleen Gough also refers to the continuing practice that "divorced or widowed women return to their matrilineal homes to live under the protection of their brothers and maternal uncles". See Schneider and Kathleen Gough (ed) Matrilineal Kinship 1961, p.409 Fr.Puthenkulam relates how it is still considered "an obligation to give shelter and economic help to any sister whose husband had deserted her or failed to provide for her". See Marriage and Family in Kerala, op.cit., p.175.

15. The Study Group for the Construction Industry appointed by the National Commission on Labour points out how the industry is unique in several respects. In this connection, the Study Group highlights the point that since construction works are not located at definite points permanently" and "the place of work changes at varying intervals", it "has given to the work a certain seasonal character". See Report, 1968, pp.4-5. See also C.K.Joshi and S.M.Pandey, Employment Relationship in the Building Industry, 1972, pp.8 and 73.

16. That women workers in construction industry have no access to skilled jobs is fully conceded by the National Commission on Labour." Unlike other industries where women are employed in semi skilled or sometimes even in skilled labourers, the tasks assigned to them are carrying earth, mortar or bricks, crushing bricks and working on hand pumps. The job of an unskilled worker is more strenuous in construction industry than in other manufacturing industries". See Report 1969, p. (425). See also S.N.Ranade and G.P.Sinha Women Construction Workers in Vina Majundar and Kumud Sharma (Eds.), Women in a Developing Economy, 1975."

17. A survey of building industry in Delhi also showed that more than half the unskilled workers "got employment information from Mistries and Jamadars". See Employment Relationship in the Building Industry, op.cit., p.52. On the basis of his study of the workers in the formal and informal sectors in Gujarat, Jan Breman relates how work is sought and found by means of personal contacts especially by those who do not have any particular skill but seek casual work. "Every single day these odd job men must look for new work and are directed in this by information they receive from their families, acquaintanes and neighbours or during casual encounters along the road". See Labour Relations in the Formal and Informal Sectors - A report of a Case Study in South Gujarat", Journal of Peasant Studies, April and July 1977.

18. Even in Delhi where rainfall is rather scanty, it was found that work on building sites is frequently brought to a stand still due to changes in weather conditions. "The duration of such interruptions of work may vary from a few hours to several days or even weeks. In the absence of a system of guaranteed wage, workers may, as a result of such interruptions [illegible] suffer serious loss of earnings in [illegible]". See Employment Relationship in the Building Industry, op.cit., p.[illegible].

19. The Kerala Minimum Wages Committee for Construction, Building and Stone Breaking and Crushing Employments "has noted that in certain places the head load workers, especially females, are taxed with unbearable loads to the extent of even buckling the human frame". See Report, 1960 p.10. Padmini Sengupta also observes that though laws have been passed regarding maximum weight loads that may be lifted by women "yet little notice is taken of women working as coolies, in private constructions and other occupations involving heavy weight". See Women Workers of India, 1960, p.188. According to the I.L.O.'s Maximum Weight Convention, 1967, no.127, "the assignment of women and young workers to manual transport of loads other than light loads shall be limited and that where women and young workers are engaged in the manual transport loads, the maximum weight of such loads shall be substantially less than that permitted for adult male workers. In fact, the Convention is supplemented by a recommendation that as far as possible adult women workers should not be assigned to regular manual transport of loads and that where adult women workers are assigned to such work, provision should be made as appropriate to reduce the time spent on actual lifting, carrying and putting down of loads by such workers and to prohibit the assignment of such workers to such manual transporting of loads which is especially ardoous. However, this as well as several other conventions have not been ratified by India "either because of certain technical, legal or administrative difficulties, or because the standards laid down in some of them are too advanced in view of the present stage of economic development of the country."See Labour Bureau, Women in Industry, 1975, pp.110-13.

20. Average daily wage rates of unskilled labour in the construction sector (urban) for Trivandrum district have moved as follows in recent past:

Trivandrum District	Male	Female	Difference
	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.
1965-66	3.10	1.75	1.35
70-71	5.18	4.10	1.08
71-72	5.12	4.11	1.01
72-73	5.65	4.70	0.95
73-74	6.36	5.14	1.22
74-75	6.83	5.52	1.31
75-76	7.68	5.89	1.79
77-78	10.00	8.00	2.00

Source: Statistics for Planning, Bureau of Economics and Statistics Kerala, 1977. p.35.

21. The Committee on the Status of Women in India notes that the difference in wage rates of unskilled labourers or mazdoors and semiskilled workers - packer, loader, unloader, etc. support the view that prejudices rather than skill or productivity differentials determine wage difference between the sexes. See Towards Equality, Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1975.

22. Here, reference must be made to very different results of the survey conducted by Johri and Pandey in regard to the working together of husbands and wives. According to them "for all practical purposes, the unit of employment in the building industry, particularly for the unskilled and the semiskilled worker is the "family" rather than the individual". a Also, one of the two factors why 80% of the female workers, as against 71% of the male workers were drawn from the younger age groups (i.e. of less than 18 years and 18-34 years taken together) is said to be "the prevalence of early marriage and the desire of the wife to work along side her husband, even at lower wages." See Employment Relationship in the Building Industry, op.cit., pp.23 and 50.

23. "The industry is accident prone owing to a variety of reasons such as falling of materials on persons from height, collapse of scaffolding, caving in of earthern works etc. In the year 1957, accident rate including death was the highest in buildings and construction industry namely 0.80 per 1000 as against 0.75 in mining and only 0.15 in factories. In the year 1966, out of 1200 accidents for which compensation was paid 94 resulted in deaths, 49 permanent disablement and remaining 1037 suffered from temporary disablement. As all the injuries are not compensated, the number of accidents does not reflect the total number of injuries occuring. It is therefore obvious that the problem of safety in building and construction industry needs serious attention." See Report of the Committee on Labour Welfare, 1969. See also Report of Study Group for the Construction Industry, op.cit. p.18.

24. The strenuous nature of work and the difficult conditions in which it is carried out, do not permit for the employment of old and weak women. In most cases, the working life of a woman in construction industry comes to an end at the age of about 40 years. Of course, several women might leave the industry much earlier for reasons of their own.

Chapter VI

KESARI, THE COIR WORKER

Coir is the name given to the husk that surrounds a coconut. Processing of the discarded husk, starting with retting of the husk, its defibring, spinning of the fibre and ending with the manufacture of various products, as e.g., ropes and mats, goes under the name of the coir industry.[1/]

All along the 540 kilometre coast of Kerala, wherever there is a stretch of backwaters one can locate men and women, in large numbers,[2/] working for the coir industry. Though the industry is quite widespread all over the State it is particularly concentrated in the three districts of Alleppey, Quilon and Trivandrum, with Trivandrum alone accounting for 19 percent of the workers engaged in the whole State. Extraction of coir fibre and spinning of coir ropes have been a source of employment in Kerala from time immemorial.

In the district of Trivandrum, very near the well-known Kovalam beach, the Arabian sea makes an in-road into the land, creating thereby a long stretch of backwaters. This place is known as Thiruvallom. On the sandy banks of these backwaters, one finds some 3,000 women engaged in the extraction and spinning of coir fibre.

Kesari and her parents

Forty year old Kesari earns her livelihood by working regularly for the coir industry. Her mother, Ponama, also is a coir worker and so was Ponama's mother, Valli.

There are several women like Kesari, who for generations past, have lived near the backwaters and earned their livelihood working

for the coir industry. Kesari, like most other coir workers in this area, belongs to the Ezhava caste.[3] The Ezhava men in this locality have also been doing work related to coconut. Kesari's grandfather was a toddy tapper. Toddy is a sweet liquid extracted by tapping the coconut flower branch before it comes out from the spathe.[4] Her father was a bullock cart driver, transporting coconuts and husks. Kesari's brother now works for an oil mill where they extract oil from dried copra with the help of power operated expellers. Her husband, Tamaram is a cultivator. Thus while there has been some work diversification on Kesari's male side, there has been no change at all on her female side. Women have been all coir workers, defibring retted coconut husks for the past three generations.

For the persisting connection with coconut, one can think of a few explanations. Firstly, more than half the area in this village is under coconut cultivation and secondly the Ezhavas, traditionally, have, as a caste group, been closely associated with coconut cultivation and processing.

The early childhood

Kesari grew up in a thatched hut that her parents had been allowed to put up by the land owner for whom Kesari's father, Kochu Chirkan, worked carting his wares. Kesari, her two sisters and two brothers, all the four older to Kesari, were all born in the same hut. Her mother, Ponama, never considered even the idea of going to the hospital and thought this was the most perfect arrangement. Out of the five children Ponama bore, only one child died. This was a male child who died of some viral infection when he was two and a half years old.

Kochu Chirkan worked for a wage. The cart and the bullocks belonged to the landlord. Sometimes Kochu Chirkan had to cart things for other people to whom the landlord would hire out the

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bullock cart. Still, he got his wage from the landlord. In return for the service he rendered additionally as a watchman, Kochu Chirkan was also allowed to put up his hut.

However, Kochu Chirkan did not live long. He died when he was only 45. The story in the neighbourhood is that Kochu had picked up a quarrel at the local toddy shop and was so badly beaten up that he had to be taken to the hospital. Ponama's story is that he hurt himself accidentally and had to be hospitalized. Whatever was the cause of Kochu's injuries, they were bad enough and he finally succumbed to them.

From the way Ponama speaks of Kochu, it is easy to make out that she was very fond of him. When he was in the hospital she prayed ardently for his life. She says that she really did not care whether he could work or not. She still wanted him around the house. Unfortunately, Ponama was left alone to raise her children.

When Kochu died, their eldest daughter, Sharada, was already married to Murali, a cross cousin, who too worked for the same landlord at his stone quarry. In all quarries, there are special men to drill holes in the rocks and blast them. It was Murali's job to drill holes, fill them with explosives and then do the blasting. In a sense, Murali's was a key job.

The widowed mother

On Kochu's death, Ponama might have been forced to move her hut elsewhere. However, since Murali had moved in with Sharada, the whole family continued to stay on the same land. But there were two kitchens under the same roof. Murali was now the landlord's watchman also.

Very soon, the State was being swept across by a series of land reform measures, one of which entitled a hutment dweller to a 10 cent piece of land, on ownership basis, without making any payment

whatsoever to the landlord.[5] Actually, Murali and Ponama each claimed a separate plot on the grounds that they were two separate households.

But the landlord would not part with more than a five cent piece and that too only to Ponama on the condition that she moved her hut some two hundred yards away from its original location by the roadside. Land by the roadside always fetches a price higher than land inside.

The landlord had made his calculation. Murali was not his agricultural labourer but Ponama, as the widow of the deceased agricultural labourer, had a rightful claim. He applied all pressure on Ponama to agree to his terms. Ponama decided to accept the landlord's offer because she was afraid that she might otherwise have to face the prospect of being thrown on the street. So she moved the hut to the five cent plot offered by the landlord. Two separate huts, one for herself and the other for Sharada were put up. Murali helped in putting up both. This way, Ponama and Sharada both continued to stay close to each other and still be a little more independent than before.

Ponama had still her remaining three children to raise. While she let her son, Krishnan, attend school, both her daughters, Sarojini and Kesari, accompanied her to work from the age of eight, earning their own keep. The girls were never sent to school.

Both Sarojini and Kesari were young women already when their father, Kochu, died. While Sharada had got married already to of her mother's choice, the younger sisters had minds of their own. Sarojini met a young man at the retting place, started living with him and had a girl from him. Then she fell out with the man. Some time later, she developed a relation with another man, 15 years her senior in age, married and with three children. He left his and set up house with Sarojini and her daughter. They have lived together ever since.

In Kesari's case the story is that Tamaram, a friend of Krishnan, fell for her and asked to marry her, even without his own mother's consent. Ponama was not sure that it was the right thing to do because Tamaram's mother was better off than her and might never quite accept Kesari. But Tamaram and Kesari got married all the same.

Kesari's registered marriage

Kesari is now almost 35. She is short and slim, looking virtually half her age. She got married to Tamaram before the Registrar. Only then did he take her to his mother, Narayani. The mother was absolutely shocked that her son had married without her consent and that too to a girl from a very much poorer family than his own. Also Kesari is a shade too dark in complexion to be considered beautiful, even among people where everyone is dark and more dark.

Tamaram knew that Narayani would never approve of Kesari. She had always spoken of wanting to marry him in a house that would be of support to them. The story in the neighbourhood is that Kesari's brother, Krishnan, is the one who encouraged Tamaram to take Kesari to the Registrar's office and get her married in his presence. However, Tamaram says that it was his own idea. But Krishnan and some of his other friends were present when their marriage was registered, an event that did attract notice in the neighbourhood. After all such a thing did not happen every day. So everyone had his/her own story to tell about this marriage.

Acceptance by her mother-in-law

When the news was broken to Narayani, she was so furious that she thought of throwing Tamaram and Kesari out of her house. Better sense prevailed however and she let them stay with her. Kesari, known all round for her good temperament, never completely won over Narayani. Finally, Narayani asked her son to put up a hut of his own on her

10-cent piece of land some distance away from her ancestral house. Narayani imposed the condition however that they would look after the six coconut trees on her land and keep her goat there till it was in milk again. Thus Narayani kept her right to both the coconuts and the goat's milk and progeny.

Kesari laughs off any question about her mother in law. "Oh, Lata and Rama, both, are her great favourites but not I." These are the names of Kesari's two daughters. The girls too make no secret of their liking for their grand mother. They must go and visit her every day after school. Indeed, she always keeps something for the kids to eat.

The daughters' schooling

Though Kesari herself never went to school she fully endorses Tamaram's decision to keep both the girls in school. Tamaram is always anxious that they should do their school home work regularly. So Kesari does not insist upon the girls doing too many of the domestic chores.

Lata is now in the eighth standard and Rama in the fifth. Their schooling is virtually free except that they have to pay a terminal fee of five rupees twice a year, and buy their own books and stationery. They are required to wear, once a week, a green and white uniform which too they must pay for. Since they belong to the Ezhava caste, they are not eligible for any lump sum cash grant which the scheduled caste children receive at school.

Kesari resents this discrimination in favour of the scheduled caste children. "How are they any more worse off than me? At least, I want my children to go to school while they do not send them in spite of the grant and concessions."

While Kesari does not ask her daughters to spend much time doing household chores, on the days their school is closed, both

Lata and Rama go along with Kesari to work. On such days Kesari is able to defibre almost twice the number of husks she does on a normal day. However, whatever money the girls thus earn, they are allowed to keep to meet their school expenses and for buying their soap and talcum powder.

Kesari and Tamaram are somewhat different than other parents in their neighbourhood in that they give schooling priority over work. Most other children go to work in the morning and go to school for the afternoon shift, whereas Lata and Rama go to work only on holidays.

Kesari and Tamaram hope that both their daughters will complete school and then get clerical jobs, preferably in Government offices. They feel that the coir industry pays very badly for very hard work. If they can help it, they would see to it that neither Lata nor Rama has anything to do with the coir industry. In fact, Tamaram's concern right now is that unless Lata, who will finish school in another two years, picks up good English she may not be able to get a clerical job.

Neither he nor Kesari is immediately worried about Lata's marriage. Both are very clear that "marriage can wait".

The small family size

How is it that Kesari and Tamaram have managed to keep their family size so small? Also, were they content with having just two daughters and no son? The answer to the first question is straightforward. "It just happened this way". When pressed, Kesari adds "No, we did not undergo any operation, nor have we practised any other family planning method". About not having a son, her answer is. "Yes, I would have liked to have one son and one daughter". It was suggested to her by her mother and some neighbours that she might consult the priest of the nearby temple

and perform certain ceremonies so that she could have a son but she did not act on that advice. Tamaram told her that he did not mind having only two daughters.

Starting a working day

Kesari has been working from the age of seven. Though small in build, she took fast to defibring along with her sisters and mother.

"It is very very messy. But you learn it in no time. I don't remember having had much problem, having watched older women doing the defibring from the moment I was born."

On a working day, Kesari has to make sure that she gets up around five O'clock. There is a bus that passes by, on the main road, at that time and Kesari, like every one else in the neighbourhood, has her ears trained to make out the passing sound of the bus at that early hour. Since, there is no latrine of their own, she uses the tapioca fields all around as a toilet. "Every one in the neighbourhood does that. We have been doing so for ages. Women try to see that they are through with it, while it is still dark and before men have got up. Tapioca fields do not lend themselves to that degree of privacy that one needs for toilet purposes."

Since the day Kesari started working as a child, there has been no change whatsoever in the routine of her working.

"Of course, I kept doing better and better in that I could defibre more husks as I grew older. But you reach your maximum soon. I reached my maximum when I was 14 or 15. After that, you always run the risk of doing less but seldom more than your maximum. I did a smaller number of husks when I did not feel well. But that was not often. Even when I was not well, I would see to it that somehow I defibred as many husks as I normally did."

Kesari did not stop working after marriage. "No, I did not think of it at all." Did not Tamaram stop her going to work? After all he was better off. "Oh, the difference was not that great. His own mother was defibring, though only at home. Moreover, since she did not quite approve of our marriage it was better that I went out to work and kept earning my keep. I think Tamaram too did not disapprove of it. That way I would be much less in his mother's way. But I don't remember if I worked it out quite like that."

After toilet, Kesari must go to the well to draw some water and have a wash. The family's supply of tooth powder is kept at the back of the house in a mud pot, suspended in an uri from a rafter. It is there for anyone to use. The girls also get up soon after their mother and help her fetch water, sweep the front yard and mop it with cow dung water. Then they take their bath near the well and get ready for school.

One of the neighbouring huts has a radio. Kesari must start cooking by the time the radio comes on, which is half past six. She must cook something early enough so that the children can eat some food and also carry some with them in their small aluminium tiffin boxes. Also both she and Tamaram must eat a proper meal before going to work. Sometimes, if Tamaram leaves home too early to eat, he returns home later to eat. Then she must leave behind some food for him. The meal Kesari cooks in the morning consists of rice and a vegetable preparation.

Once she is through with cooking she tidies up the place and gets ready to go to work. Her hair is well oiled and combed. She wears a neat lungi and a blouse on top of a bodice. A towel length piece of white toweling covers the breasts.

Going to work site

Usually Kesari goes to work in a groupof four, consisting of Ponama, her mother, Sarojini her second sister and Shanta, her

first sister Sharada's daughter. Sharada herself stopped going to work many many years back, first because she had several children in quick succession, five boys and four girls, and then because she had such a large family to look after.

Every morning, four of these women go to Thiruvallom, where a long stretch of backwaters meets the river Karamana. They can get to the work site by a wide metalled road, which was completed in the past two or three years as an alternative access route to the seaside without passing through the beach area which has been developed as an international tourist resort. But they don't keep to the road all along. They take as many short cuts as possible through the coconut groves and tapioca fields. That way, they probably save about five minutes. However, whenever they are on the metalled road they come by other women, some of whom are also heading for the backwaters. But there are others who are preparing to settle down by the road side, next to piles of granite stones which have to be broken into chips.

According to Kesari, lately the number of stone chippers has increased noticeably. This is understandable because there is a marked increase in construction activity in the State. She is aware of the new wave of migration to the Middle East, usually referred to as Gulf, and the consequential inflow of funds. She has also heard of the few men from the neighbouring village who went to the Gulf, made money and put up new houses.

Unloading of husks

As one approaches the backwaters, one sees a large line of bullock carts some unloading, and others waiting to unload, green husks, In the open yards of houses, all around, one sees women busy either working at the spinning wheel, ratt,[6] making coir ropes or drying them in the sun. As you go further, you come by two or three shops, a tea shop and a small stall to fix iron shoes for the bullocks. One turns left at that point into a good sized

mud road. Along this road you see a lot of activity. Several men can be seen either counting, or carrying on their heads, green coconut husks in netted bags. Each such bag holds between 75 to 100 husks. They are carried close to the water. The bullock carts cannot reach there because of the somewhat marshy terrain. At the spot where these green husks are unloaded, another counting takes place, again by men. All this male activity is quite feverish. It looks like as if the men involved are constantly running to and fro loaded with large bundles of green husks, each bundle weighing approximately 70 to 80 kilos.

The explanation offered for this pace of exclusive male activity is that men get paid at the piece rates of Rs.8 per 1,000 husks. The more he transports in a day, the greater is his wage for that day. On an average, one man can transport 1500 husks in a day, making between fifteen to twenty trips, and earn 12 rupees.

Retting of husks

Once you come to the retting area, the strong pungent smell cannot be missed. Also the backwaters here have acquired a dark reddish brown colour with years of retting. All over, you can locate tops of mounds of husks submerged in water. These submerged husks are in different stages of decay and discoloration. Each mound, consisting, on the average, of 1,000 husks, is enclosed in a coir netting. When a mound of green husks is first lowered into the water, it is covered all over with muddy slime and palm leaves with a stump sticking up showing the name of its owner and the date it was submerged.

There are men whose special job it is to prepare, lower and position the netted mounds in water. There is, at the same time, another set of men who are taking retted husks out of water. These are the husks which, after months of submergence in brackish water, are now ready to be given away for defibring. So one is bound to see some men wading through water for one purpose or the other,

practically all through the day. You also see large boats being poled in or out of these waters because quite a good quantity of green husks also reaches this retting area through boats.

Retting is very important for the production of coir fibre. Husks have to remain submerged in saline water for a period ranging from six to eight months. During this period, the husks undergo certain microbiological action which helps the non-fibrous part to rot and disintegrate. It is believed that the saline backwaters, with an occasional change of water due to tidal action, create the optimam conditions for the type of micro-biological action considered necessary for the purpose. There are differences in the quality and the yield of the fibre among different parts of the State and these differences are possibly due to the nature of water available. The fibre prepared in less ideal conditions will be weak. The best variety of coir fibre will have a golden colour and is virtually free of pith.

Defibring of husks

All along the banks of the stretch of backwaters in Thiruvallom, women can be seen engaged in defibring retted husks. Thousands of them, of practically all ages, are sprawled all over, squatting and beating husks.

Kesari's work place is less than a hundred yards from where the green husks are being collected for retting. Kesari and her mother, Ponama, have their work spot next to each other on either side of a tender coconut sapling. Every one has her fixed place. Sarojini and Shanta sit some distance away.

Usually, it is a woman worker, called kontrak, who hands out retted husks on behalf of the ratt owner. The word 'kontrak' is derived from the English word, contractor. It is to this kontrak that the women husk beaters are accountable for the fibre from the retted husks given to them. Where a woman is a full time

kontrak she takes care of 15 to 20 women husk beaters. However, since most of the producers of coir yarn in Thiruvallom own only one pair of ratts, the three-wheeled wooden contrivances used for spinning the coir fibre, most kontrak women combine their supervisory job with part-time defibring. The kontrak woman, Kesari currently works for, is employed by a producer who own only one pair of ratts. So the fibre needed by the one ratt producer can provide daily employment to not more than four full time husk beaters including the kontrak woman.1/

Becoming a kontrak is a sort of recognition and gives the women both a better status and better wages than if they are pure husk beaters. Though Kesari has been working for almost 20 years, defibring retted husks, she hasn't yet had the break which would make her, at least, a part-time kontrak like the one she is now working for.

Kesari's work routine

Every woman worker here has to have her own equipment. The latter consists of a wooden plank, a piece of black granite stone, and several mallets of different strengths. Kesari shares these with her mother.

The moment she reaches her work spot, Kesari changes into her work clothes, which are not only no better than rags but also absolutely soiled. They probably were washed a year back, if not earlier. After Kesari changes into her work clothes she must, like every other woman worker, tie a piece of cloth round her head to prevent her hair from getting soiled. Then she goes to collect the first lot of retted husks to be defibred from the kontrak woman.

She collects about twenty five husks at a time. When she has defibred these, she goes to collect the next lot. Usually, she is able to do 70 to 75 husks in a day.

Each husk has three sections. They are called "cheras".

Kesari takes each chera at a time, peels off its outer skin - this she can take home for lighting her fire when it is dry - and squeezes out the extra water in it in the manner of rinsing a piece of wet cloth. She has dug out a small basin shaped hole in the ground, next to where she sits down to work. It is in the hole that the water from retted husks is allowed to collect.

After rinsing a chera lightly, Kesari places it on her piece of flat stone and beats it hard with a mallet at both ends to separate the fibre from the pith and other materials. The pith matter splashes all over her, body and face, as it disintegrates. Usually, she dips the chera in water a couple of times, beats it again at either end. Then she shakes the beaten fibre hard and stacks the fibre in a heap.

Sex discrimination in wages

The current piece rate is Rs.1.60 for defibring 100 cheras.[8/] Kesari can defibre between 210 and 225 sections in a day. So she makes between Rs.3.26 and 3.60 every day.

We have noted already that while headload transporting and retting of husks is entirely in the hands of men, defibring is left entirely to women. Though both men and women work on piece rate basis, the wages they earn differ significantly. Thus for transporting green husks, given the piece rate of eight rupees per thousand, a man makes between Rs.12 and Rs.16 per day since he transports between 1,500 to 2,000 husks in a day. Similarly, since the piece rate for retting is seven rupees for a 1,000 and since a team of two men can submerge nearly 5,000 husks in a day, each makes Rs.17.50 per day.

Compared to the daily male wage at between Rs.12.00 and Rs.17.50, the wage of between Rs.3.26 and Rs.3.60 which Kesari makes as a husk beater, in a day, is clearly very very low, and Kesari is, by no standard, below average in her work performance.

The kontrak woman makes slightly more than Kesari because she gets an additional two rupees for every 1,000 retted husks (i.e., 3,000 cheras) distributed to husk beaters like Kesari. This additional income she realises every fourth day when 1,000 husks have been defibred. Thus if a woman husk beater earns not more than Rs.3.50 a day, the typical kontrak woman who combines her supervisory work with full time defibring earns Rs.4.10 a day. Thus even the kontrak woman's wage comes no where near the wage that a male head-load transporter, or retter of husks makes in a day.

Defibring apart, the other main activity within the coir industry which provides sizeable employment to women is spinning. For every one woman engaged in defibring, there are almost two women engaged in the spinning of coir yarn. But a good number (55%) of the latter are engaged in hand spinning. However, hand spinning of coir yarn is not very common in Trivandrum district, the women engaged in Thiruvallom area work on three spindled ratts for making Muppiri yarn[9] and make about Rs.3.50 a day. In fact though both defibring and wheel spinning are paid for on piece rates, these rates are normally so aligned to each other that the average daily wage is more or less the same in both defibring as well as wheel spinning. So whether a woman is engaged as a husk beater or wheel spinner, the wage she makes is equally low.[10]

Why don't women take to head-load transporting and counting of husks? After all, women do head-load transporting in construction, brick making and agriculture. The answer does not take long to come. "Those are male jobs. We don't want to mix up with men. True, our wage works out to be very low, but isn't this a more respectful way of working, women working with women?"

Could she not count 4-5,000 green husks in a day? Could she not transport on your head 1,500 to 2,000 husks in a day? "Of course I could", is Kesari's response but she has never considered doing it. "In any case, is that option at all open to us, women?"

The reservation about working with men is certainly there but Kesari is, at the same time, quite aware that women do work in the company of men in construction and some other industries.

The alternative occupation realistically open to Kesari, in her neighbourhood, is of a stone crusher, a job which not only is much harder and more hazardous but also equally badly paying. Moreover, while in defibring she works in the company of women of her own caste-group, Ezhavas, stone crushers are drawn mostly from a lower caste group, Pulayas.

Availability of employment

For India as a whole, a female agricultural labourer is able to secure wage employment in agriculture for not more than 148 days in a year. She is able to secure employment in non-agricultural jobs for another 11 days in a year. Thus altogether a female agricultural labourer gets, on an average, work for not more than 160 days in a year. The corresponding figure for Kerala is 157. (All the above figures of work availability are for 1964-65.)[11] The women agricultural labourer in Trivandrum, studied by me, got work for only 120 days in a year, 60 in agriculture and 60 in other jobs. On the other hand, since Kesari gets work in coir for 300 days in a year she is much better placed than the woman agricultural labourer. However, when one takes into account the fact that Kesari makes not more than Rs.3.50 a day as against the prevailing (1978) daily wage of Rs.8 in agriculture, Kesari comes out worse off, though marginally, in terms of the total annual earnings. But this still does not allow for the fact that one's food requirement is greater on days one is working than on days one is not working. So Kesari's position is more than marginally worse off compared to an agricultural labourer, notwithstanding her own complacency, or sense of resignation.

Threat of mechanisation

Indeed, Kesari's, as for all the husk beating women

Kerala, chief concern is that even their present work may be snatched away from them any day. This concern arises because of the strong lobby in favour of mechanising husk beating operation. In fact, the threat of mechanisation was so real and close some years back that it could be averted only by strong public agitation.

A simple husk beating machine, developed indigenously, can, if operated with the help of 10 persons in an 8 hour shift, defibre a minimum of 8,000 husks, a task that only a team of 100 women husk beaters can complete in one day. Several such machines were actually installed in different parts of the State during the period, 1965 to 1974. Eight such machines were installed in 1970 in Thiruvallam. That the displacement of labour caused by this particular machine was considerable should have been obvious from the very outset. However, it took almost eight years for resentment to build up in the State against the introduction of this machine. Meanwhile some 400 machines had been installed all over the State.

One of the centres of coir industry where workers' agitation against the installation of this machine was particularly strong was Varaimuttam which is just two kilometres away from Thiruvallom. It was in May of 1972 that the workers of this area, men as well as women, got together to take protest action by preventing the entry of retted husks into the factories. The factory owners sought police protection. One day, as five boats stacked with retted husks were approaching the shores of the backwaters, some men jumped into the water and pushed back the boats. So there was a scuffle right in water. On the shore itself, some one thousand women workers had collected to prevent the boats from landing the husks. Kesari herself had walked to Varaimuttam and was a participant in this protest demonstration.12/

Kesari's story is that when the police failed to stop these determined, but completely unarmed and absolutely peaceful, women from advancing towards the shore, it resorted to firing in which one woman died and 30 had to be treated in the hospital for

injuries. The police story is that they had to resort to firing because of stone throwing. Kesari is emphatic however that the job of stone throwing was done by a few hirelings of the factory owners and that it was pre-planned and in the full knowledge of the police. Whether or not the stone throwing and the police firing thereafter were planned or not, the killing of one woman sparked off such a wave of protest and indignation all through the State that it could not be ignored for long.

By the beginning of 1974, the State Government had to bow down to public pressure and ban altogether the use of defibring machines in the four southern districts of Kerala, including Trivandrum. But the issue of mechanising defibring crops up ever so often that the continuing concern of the one hundred thousand or so women workers engaged in defibring cannot be considered misplaced.

Going back from work

Kesari sits down to work at about eight in the morning and goes on working till about half past three in the afternoon except for a few very short breaks. Every two hours or so she takes a sip of water from the bottle that she carries to work. On days it is very hot she seldom takes a lunch or even tea break. Only very occasionally, does she allow herself the luxury of a 20 paisa fruit cake from the hawker who goes round.

Around half past three comes round the teenage boy who too works for the ratt owner to collect the last instalment of fibre from Kesari and other husk beaters who are defibring husks for that ratt owner.

With the day's work done, Kesari puts together her equipment and puts them in a hole she has made for the purpose in the ground and covers up the hole with leaves. Then she goes to the nearby fresh water stream to have a wash. She always carries with her a piece of laundry soap and washes her face, hands and feet thoroughly

before changing her clothes. Then, she goes to collect her wage from the kontrak.

On her way back home, along with her mother, sister and sister's daughter, she deposits the bundle of her work clothes in a basket she keeps in a relative's backyard not very far from the work site.

Usually, Kesari is back home from work by half past four.

The thatched hut

As was mentioned earlier, this hut was put up on land that belongs to Tamaram's mother. They have been living here ever since they got married. The hut is made out of thatch, walls and roof, on a plinth which is raised about one foot above the ground to prevent rain water from entering the hut. The whole floor is plastered with a mixture of clay with the ash powder from burnt coconut husks. This mixture lends a certain smoothness to the mud's surface. The walls, outer as well as inner, are made of neatly matted cadjan leaves, called 'thatti', supported by bamboo and areca poles from the inside of the hut. The hut has two doors. The one facing West is the entrance to the hut; it is made of solid wood. The back door, exactly opposite, facing East, is made of thatti and split bamboo.

As you enter the hut, you come into a passage made of two thatti walls. On the right side is the kitchen and on the left side is the family room. The sloping thatched roof rests on a network of bamboo and reed rafters sitting on a frame made out of bamboo and areca poles.

Kesari's 10' x 5' kitchen is kept very neat. Two stoves made of bricks and mud have been put up in a row. From the roof are suspended two uris and from the walls a few coir rope loops. The uris are meant to hold vessels with cooked food and the loops support husk

peels and twigs. A small wooden plank, 2' x ½', is tied to the poles to form a shelf to hold a few small cans and bottles. The hurricane lantern also hangs by a pole. Thus, the floor space is kept absolutely free with nothing except the stones and some mud pots.

The only other room in the hut is the bed room which is bigger, being 10' x 12'. There, too, the floor space is kept absolutely free except for a wooden plank, 5' x 1', resting on bricks. This plank serves the purpose of a book case for the two girls. A small reed basket, holding all the make up equipment of the girls, including a tin of talcum powder, hangs by a wall pole. Four mats and two pillows, all rolled up are suspended from the walls with coir rope loops. In the night, they are spread out for all the four family members to sleep.

Towards the North, the slope of the roof extends a little longer, and therefore lower, to make roof for the goat shed which too is enclosed by thatti. In this shed is kept Tamaram's mother's goat. There is also a small work area at the back of the hut for washing vessels and clothes. It is by the wall there that a mud pot containing both ash powder made out of burnt rice husks and the two water carriers, made out of areca leaves are suspended.

The evening meal

Kesari's main concern on her return from work is the evening meal for the family. Neither she nor Tamaram eats out ordinarily. While Kesari and the girls have tea at home sweetened with palm sugar (jaggery), Tamaram allows himself the luxury of tea with milk and sugar at the nearby tea shop. So the meals to be cooked at home have to be substantial.

They have an eight unit ration card and Kesari regularly draws the weekly rice ration of 4.50 kilos. Since she cooks roughly three-quarters kilo of rice daily, there is seldom any

need for her to buy more than one kilo rice every week from the open market, where the price can sometimes be very much higher. Lately however, the premium in the open market does not exceed 50 paise per kilo. When the sugar too was sold on ration card, Kesari used to surrender her entitlement to the local grocery store and encash the premium. As for her own tea she never used anything but palm sugar for sweetening.

Kesari's daily shopping consists usually of fish for one rupee, a mixture of spices including chillies for 25 paise and one and a half kilos of tapioca which costs between 60 and 70 paise. Kesari buys tapioca on her way back home from work unless she knows that Tamaram will bring some home from his work. For fish, and spices, she sends Lata or Rama to the Andi-chandø, the evening market, located only 10 yards away from their hut. Very often, Tamaram carries home some vegetables and they have their own supply of coconuts; though originally Narayani asked for all the coconuts from her trees, lately she allows them to keep some for their use. They consume coconuts at the rate of one in two days. But they have to buy some coconut oil from outside, usually for about 25 paise every day, for both cooking and hair, in fact, more for the hair.

Kesari asks the children to help her as little as possible. Since both Kesari and Tamaram are very keen that the girls should devote as much time as possible to their studies, Kesari cooks both the meals herself. But the evening meal is the bigger of the two. Of whatever Kesari cooks in the evening, she sets apart a portion for the morning meal. She does not have so much time to give to cooking in the morning. Once the meal is cooked, Tamaram and the girls eat first. Then comes Kesari's own turn to eat. Sharing of food appears to be fairly even. After all, there are no male children. Still, going by the daily average intake of calories of not more than 2200 per capita it would not be surprising that Kesari stints on herself despite the full load of work that she carries, virtually without any holiday, throughout the year. Usually the dinner is over before dusk and Kesari has ample time to clean the vessels, store the left

over food for the morning meal and sweep the kitchen before it is time to sleep.

The husband's work

Forty-year-old Tamaram is of medium height and small built. He is soft spoken and a man of great dignity. He is, as we shall note, a very hard working and enterprising man. Tamaram is first and foremost an agricultural labourer. He has no land of his own nor does he hold any lease on a piece of land. He gets work mostly in the cultivation of coconut and tapioca. In the area where he lives, these are the two main crops grown. There is some paddy cultivation also but Tamaram does not go after that.

Tapioca cultivation

Since, coconut cultivation does not provide adequate employment, Tamaram, like most other male agricultural labourers in the area, go in also for tapioca cultivation which too is quite well spread here. On raised laterite soil, you can grow either coconut or tapioca. But a coconut tree planted today does not start yielding fruit until seven to eight years whereas tapioca can be harvested in eight months' time. Of course, tapioca can be grown also in lands not otherwise very fertile. So it does not always compete for land with other crops.

The major tapioca crop is raised between February and June and is harvested between December and March. A minor crop is raised in September or October and harvested in July and August. Tamaram gets some days of work both when tapioca is sowed and also when it is harvested. Work for sowing consists of digging pits of 1' x 1' at a distance of 2 to 2½ feet and filling these pits with compost, manure and ash and covering them with earth. The earth over the pit is heaped with a rounded surface and a piece of tapioca stem is stuck in the middle of this surface, with half of it sticking out. Tapioca harvesting is relatively simple. You have to cut

dig the tubers out of the ground. If one acre of land under tapioca gives employment for 11 man days for sowing, it offers employment for only one man day for harvesting.

Tamaram gets about 60 days of work in a year on tapioca cultivation as against 15 days in coconut cultivation. Once a coconut sapling has been planted and it has struck roots, all that needs being done by way of cultivation is a very occasional tilling of the pit around the tree. Tamaram's work is largely in connection with planting new saplings.

The rest of the year, Tamaram has to fend for himself elsewhere, and, as we shall see presently, he does not sit by idly at home waiting for work to knock at his door. The daily male wage is the same, viz., ten rupees, for tapioca cultivation as for coconut cultivation.

Vegetable cultivation

Tamaram and two other men, also agricultural labourers, have together entered into an arrangement with a land owner under which they cultivate and harvest tapioca for him free on a 30-cent piece of land and in return he has allowed them to inter-plant vegetables along with tapioca, during the first three months, after the tapioca sowing. They utilise this period for growing vegetables like cucumber and snake gourd.[14/]

Tamaram and his two friends share the work and cost involved in the vegetable gardening, ie., giving water, weeding, manuring and taking care of the vegetable plants. These vegetable mature in three months. Thus before the tapioca plants are ready to shoot up Tamaram and his friends have harvested their vegetable crop. They take the vegetables to the main wholesale market in Trivandrum city, carting it along with several other vegetable growers in a hired bullock cart. Last year, the three together made a net income of about Rs.180 from vegetables and divided it equally among them.

Banana cultivation

In addition, Tamaram has taken a ten cent piece of land, on a rental arrangement that has to be renewed every year, for banana cultivation. He has to pay an annual rent of Rs.200 for this land. The rent is actually calculated on the basis of the number of banana plants one puts in. Every banana plant carries a rent of 4 rupees. Tamaram usually puts in 50 banana plants on a ten cent piece of land.

Tamaram has been doing banana cultivation now for the last ten years. In between, for a couple of years he had to give up banana cultivation when he was not keeping too well. Tamaram's explanation of his illness is that he had been working very hard without eating adequately and regularly. Now he has become much more careful. He underwent some Ayurvedic treatment and feels much better. For the last three years now, he has done the banana cultivation without a break.

The cultivation of bananas keeps Tamaram very busy. He has to manure the plants six times. Each manuring costs him 35 rupees, Rs.10 on cowdung and Rs.25 on a combination of ash, potash and ammonia. His expenses on manuring alone are thus around Rs.210. He also spreads dry leaves around the plants. A basket (kutta) of dry leaves costs him Rs.five. Sometimes, when Kesari has time she collects them for him. He needs at least five kuttas of dry leaves for his fifty plants. After the plants have been put in, they have to be watered every second day. Tamaram carries water in buckets made out of arecaleaves and uses a long bamboo pole to carry two such buckets at a time. According to Tamaram himself, banana cultivation keeps him occupied full-time for 50 days and partially for 153 days.

Unless rain or disease damages the crop, Tamaram expects a yield of 50 bunches, each fetching Rs.25 at the current price. So his gross receipts shall amount to Rs.1,250, against which his expenses on manuring and rent, but without allowing for the labour

that he himself put in, adds up to Rs.435. Thus his net income from banana cultivation can be put at Rs.875, in a normal year. But last year he did not even recover his costs because his crop had got badly damaged. Assuming however that(a) of the 203 days he is occupied in banana cultivation he thus spends, on an average, only half a working day and (b) he nets an annual income of Rs.875, it works out to about eight rupees for a full working day. This is less than the currently prevailing male wage of Rs.10 in agriculture and construction for unskilled work. But Tamaram seems to derive great satisfaction from his 'banana farm' and likes to talk about it.

Raising loan

If however the crop gets damaged, as it happened twice in the past 10 years, his problem is to raise money to pay back the cost incurred in the previous year and at the same time buy manure for raising the next crop. The village coconut merchant came to Tamaram's rescue every time by lending him money on the security of his mother's coconut trees. Of course, this meant that the mother too must agree to this arrangement. He can borrow at the rate of Rs.200 per tree. So long as the loan is outstanding, the merchant has the right to the coconuts the particular tree bears.

Tamaram quite understands the interest rate implications of the transaction but he does not think that he is being made to pay an oppressively high interest.[15/] Of course, he would welcome an opportunity to borrow at a lower rate of interest but he is not sure that banks will be so flexible as the merchant. "Will the bank lend me money on the strength of my mother's coconut trees or on the strength of my banana trees that I raise on some one else's land, particularly when the crop gets damaged?"

Whether Tamaram has work outside or not, the six coconut trees around his hut must be attended to at regular intervals. That is one of the conditions on which he is living on his mother's plot of land. Also he takes care of his mother's goat.

which is due to deliver any day now. Then he will have to take care of the goat's kids as well.

Thus Tamaram does not seem to be short of work. Is this some what unusual? Not so, according to Tamaram. Practically all his friends and relatives in the neighbourhood, who are not working for the coir industry, are similarly occupied. Butit is hard work and returns are not always assured. Kesari's work, though very much less well paid, is far more regular, he feels. If only the threat of mechanisation did not loom over their heads.

The husband's view

Has he ever thought of taking Kesari out of her hard, oppressive and low-paying job of a husk beater? Never, though he himself earns almost three times as much as Kesari every day, still Kesari's contribution, steady as it has been, is very important for the family. All the same, he has made up his mind that his daughters must never become husk beaters, like their mother. That is why he and Kesari both are very keen that they should do reasonably well at school so that they get qualified for a more decent employment. By sheer hard work and careful planning, Kesari and Tamaram have so far been able to make both ends meet. They will also see the children through school.

Their next plan is to extend and improve their house. They want to put up a slightly bigger house on the same plot, so that the two girls together can have a separate room to themselves. Also their idea is to put up walls with unburnt bricks on a plinth with cement surfacing and to have wooden doors and windows. They would like also to have a lavatory next to the house so that Kesari and the two girls can use it any time of the day. But they don't mind having a roof of cadjan leaves. They shall get all the palms they need from their own coconut trees and can make their own coir ropes. So this does not involve any major expense. It is with this sort

of immediate perspective that Tamaram has stacked six wooden door-frames in the verandah of their thatched hut.

Both Kesari and Tamaram have plans also to buy a cow some day. Even a good local non-descript cow costs no less than Rs.250. So Tamaram must save that much one season. "My problem is that I never manage to have that much cash ready with me when I come across some one who is wanting to sell off his/her good cow. And no one sells sells a cow on credit". Why doosn't he borrow the money, if he knows that you can repay the amount soon? "It takes time to raise a loan of that order. By the time you have raised the loan, the cow may have been sold off. But once you have the cash on you, it just gets spent on unnecessary things. No, I won't borrow the money. Still we shall buy a cow one day so that we all, especially the children, can eat better."

When a hard working and enterprising man like Tamaram joins an outwardly meek but determined woman like Kesari, it does appear that however big the handicap with which they start, they will ultimately make it. Does this not give one some hope?

Summary observations

Our female coir husk beater, Kesari, works full time for a wage that would not be sufficient to maintain her and her family even though she gets employment for 300 days in a year. Together with her agricultural labourer husband, Tamaram, who gets wage employment for 80 days in a year and supplements his income by taking land on a rental basis for banana and vegetable cultivation (the rent for the latter is payable in labour), they have succeeded in raising their two girls, the only children born to them, and are trying to see them through school in the hope that they will be able to secure a better paid, less onerous and cleaner employment and thereby escape the rigours and deprivation of husk beating.

There is no doubt that Kesari and Tamaram are somewhat exceptional in that they have kept their family small, and raised their children well. Most children in the neighbourhood drop out from school, sooner or later, and look for work, be it in coir industry, agriculture or some where else. Kesari's elder sister, Sharada, has eight children. Not one of them has completed school. Several other children in the neighbourhood combine second shift school with work. Kesari and Tamaram are also somewhat different in that they don't feel particularly deprived for not having any son. In fact they never undertook any special fasts or pilgrimages for the purpose of propiating their gods to get either a son or anything else. They are not a particularly keen temple going lot at all, without being agnostic. "When I get time, I do pray for a better future for my girls", is Kesari's response.

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Notes and References

1. It is believed that the word 'coir' is derived from Malayalam, in which it is used for hard threads extracted from the coconut husks. From Malayalam the word is supposed to have been transmitted to the European vocabulary through the famous Italian traveller, Marco Polo. See Coir Board, Commodity Notes, 1971, and Mohammed Kunju, Coir Yarn, A Study on Different Types of Coir Yarn, Coir Board, 1966, p.3.

2. The estimates of the number of people working in this industry are varied. According to the 1971 Census, the total number of women involved in this industry was 109,094 as against 49,513 men. Thus the total number of persons engaged full time in the industry was placed at 1,58,607, a figure which excludes all secondary workers. According to the Coir Board, the number of people engaged in the industry was as large as 445,900 in 1973. However, the latter figure is for the whole country. Assuming that 90% of the labour employed in this industry is concentrated in Kerala, the figure for Kerala would work out to 4,01,300. It is this figure which is comparable to the earlier Census figure of 158,607. The explanation for such a large disparity may very largely be that the Coir Board figure includes part time workers whereas the Census figure does not. The 1961 Census did not altogether exclude part time workers, though its

CHAPTER VII

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Since I believe that the five working women I have studied in depth are not untypical, in spite of the individualities of each one of them, I see no reason why I should not permit myself the liberty of drawing some broad inferences and making some generalisations on the basis of these profiles, if only to spur further enquiry and research.

Why do women work?

All the five women have, or had, husbands who are, or were, engaged in casual wage labour. The women agricultural labourer is married to a truck loader. The brick worker's husband was a boatman. The husband of the construction worker was also working in the construction industry as an unskilled hand. The coir worker's husband is an agricultural labourer and the fish vendor's husband has been a coolie fisherman.

By taking to work, these women are able to minimize the number of days either of them is, or was, without work. The idea could have been that if both husband and wife looked for work, at least one of them would end up getting work.

In all the five cases, however, the women were engaged in work even before they got married. They were first working to supplement their parents' income and later to supplement the income of their own families.

The choice of their occupation

Excepting my construction worker, who came from a family of weavers and moved into construction work after marrying a construction worker, the other four women are engaged in the same occupation

now after 20-30 years in which they started as children. All these four are, in fact, engaged in the occupation that their mothers had taken to.

The nature of their work

Though all the five women studied are working in different occupations, the nature of work open to them is quite similar in many ways. It is mostly unskilled, backbreaking and physically exhausting work. Three out these five women are, basically, head-load transporters of goods. The construction and brick workers, both, work almost exclusively as head-load transporters. The fish vendor combines door to door vending with head-load transportation over long distances. Even the agricultural labourer, when she is not transplanting and weeding, is doing head-load transporting Also, practically all the work she gets outside of agriculture is of head-load transporting. The coir worker is the only one who does not have to do head-load carrying, but her job is very messy, unpleasant and strenuous.

I am not suggesting however that women alone do unskilled, physically exhausting and messy jobs but it appears to me that women tend to be restricted to only such jobs.

Sex typing of jobs

Several jobs in the five different occupations studied seem to be typed as male or female. In all these five occupations there are certain jobs that are almost exclusively female. In the brick industry head-load carrying of clay and sun-dried bricks is an exclusively female job. In the construction industry, carrying of granite stones, cement, sand and earth is very largely women's job. Sometimes, however, you do come across men also doing head-load carrying on construction sites. Still, in the coir industry, women are excluded altogether from head-load transporting. Transporting

of green or retted husks on head is an exclusively male task. In fish vending, head-load fish vending is exclusively female and in agriculture too transplanting and weeding are done always by women.

Sex discrimination in wages

As we know, wage payments are made either on piece rate basis or on daily rate basis. Out of the five women studied, four work for wages. Out of these four, two are paid on piece rate basis and two are paid on daily rate basis.

Sex discrimination in wages is both open and subtle. In coir and brick women are restricted to only certain jobs that are low paid, while in construction even when they do the same job they are paid less.

Regardless of the system of wage payment, women get paid less than men in each of the four occupations. However discrimination is not necessarily open. In the brick making industry, men do not do head-load transporting, the least paid work, and women never graduate to better paid work. A man can some day hope to become a moulder of clay into bricks; women can never. In construction where there is some overlap in work between men and women there is both open as well as concealed sex discrimination. Women's daily wage is openly less than men's. At the same time, while women are, for all their lives, confined to the lowest paid jobs in construction, men have a chance to graduate to better paid jobs.

In agriculture, sex discrimination is of the open type in that the women get paid less than men for the same job. But there are hardly any better jobs that even men can graduate to in the course of time.

In coir industry, on the other hand, sex discrimination is totally of the concealed or subtle variety. Because jobs are typed as male and female, and given the different piece rates fixed for

these jobs, women end up getting distinctly lower wages than men.

Scope for vertical mobility

In none of the five occupations studied, do women seem to have any scope for improvement in pay and work status. In construction a man can become a mason if he is willing to learn the hard way and has the right contacts. In brick industry, while a man becomes a moulder in due course, women remain head load carriers all their lives. In coir, too, the position is virtually the same. A woman husk beater may one day become a kontrak. Still, she will get paid far less than the least paid man in the industry.

In agriculture, the scope for vertical mobility seems to be equally non-existent for both men and women, though the coir worker's husband has been able to take on a semi-cultivator's status with respect to at least his banana cultivation. Likewise, while the fish vendor has remained a head-load vendor all her life, her husband had improved his position during that interlude in his life when he owned his own catamaran and a couple of nets.

The norm

With low wages and no scope for improvement, is it a matter of surprise if even for women who have worked all along, the desire is to withdraw from work?

Moreover, work as such does not seem to give women any better status either in their own self-estimation or in the social estimation. In work, women are at the lowest rung of hierarchy. In the neighbourhoods where these working women live, the households which can afford not to send their women to work, manual work, gain in social esteem.

Still, of the five families studied only one has made a serious, continuing effort to see that the female children will not

be pushed into their mother's work. The coir worker's two daughters have gone to school regularly and both the parents appear to be equally earnest in seeing them through school so that the girls are qualified for better, preferably non-manual, jobs. In the other four families studied, if there are grown up daughters, they have already taken to the mother's work and the ones still growing up have dropped from school and will, most likely, take to the mother's work.

Commitment to the family

In three out of the five families studied, the working woman is now the principal earner. The construction worker has been deserted by her husband for several years now. Her grown up son, who has had eight years of schooling, has still to get settled down to work. Her daughter, in her early teens, has yet to start going out to work. The brick worker's husband has retired from his work as a boatman. Her grown up sons and daughters are married and living separately with their own families. The grown up unmarried daughter earns her own keep and also saves a little for her marriage. The fish vendor's husband has not gone out fishing because of ill health but at least two out of her five sons might soon start earning their keep. Her eldest, who has been to school, however, proved a liability because he would not dirty his hands and clothes doing fishing or any other manual work. The other two sons are too young to take to work. While the grown up married daughter is looking after her own family, the girl still in her early teens is occupied full time doing the household chores when the mother is out vending fish. So for these three families, existence itself will be problematic if our principal respondent were not working. They are the mainstay of their families. In the other two families, i.e., of the agricultural labourer and the coir worker, the husbands are fully involved in work and are contributing to the upkeep of the family.

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Wage contribution

If one were to judge the commitment of these women to the family by the proportion of their wage or daily earnings which they take back home and compared it with what their husbands contributed when they were earning and living with them, women's commitment is clearly stronger than men's. Women invariably brought back home a greater proportion of their wage than their men.

Still another way of judging the commitment would be the readiness to take up any job. Thus while women were prepared to take up any job when there was no work available in their own occupation, men generally tended to stick to their own occupation. While the agricultural labourer took up jobs in construction and brick making, her husband would only do loading and unloading of trucks.

In the sense of attachment to the children also, the women's commitment is stronger than men's. In the few cases of desertion I came across in the course of these studies men have almost always moved out leaving the children to the care of the mother.

Sex discrimination in child-rearing

How can one complain about sex discrimination in wages or weaker commitment of men to their families, when the same women themselves practice discrimination against their own sex in their own houses? In my studies I found that (a) boys stayed longer in schools than girls; (b) boys were not expected to do virtually any household chores; (c) boys were allowed much greater freedom to spend whatever wages they earned and (d) boys got relatively better food in terms of the claim to rice against tapioca.

On the other hand, (a) a girl has to do all the supporting household chores even when she goes to school; (b) she has to stop school when she is needed full time in the house; and (c) she has to contribute most of what she earns to the house when she goes

out to work.

Possibly, the reasons for this attitude on the part of the women are: (a) that they hope to be looked after by their sons in their old age; (b) that while the sons bring in a dowry, the daughters are a liability; and (c) that a son can hope to move into a better paid skilled, and sometimes possibly a regular, permanent job, whereas the daughter will work all her life for a low wage and be hard up.

While in actual practice, I have found that in the families I have studied, the surviving men or women of the older generation are being looked after more often by the daughters than sons, the fact remains that one disability, real or supposed, attaching to the female sex becomes the reason for foisting on it still another.

Conclusion

While I have indulged in generalizations to some extent, and I do not feel apologetic on that score, I see considerable need for further studies of the lives and problems of working women in various occupations. Most working women come from very poor households and when they happen to be the main bread winners, the incidence of poverty is possibly the greatest. If we want to study the poorest of the poor households, these are the households we should be looking at.

TABLE IV.1

Transformation efficiency of energy sectors in THE US. AND THE UK

(Per cent)

	U.S.A.		U.K.		
	1963	1968	1968	1968	1971-72
Coal	98.6	99.3	95.5	96.0	95.5
Coke			75.5	84.7	88.0
Gas	86.2	90.9	64.7	71.9	81.1
Oil production	96.1	94.6			
Oil refining	83.3	82.8	80.8	38.2	89.6
Electricity	25.7	26.3	22.0	23.9	25.2

Sources: Herendeen and Bullard 1974: 25, 32.
Chapman, Leach and Slessor 1974: 231.

is 19 per cent higher than one derived by tracing the energy consumption to car manufacturing and to industries supplying its immediate inputs. Hence if one is interested in indirect energy requirements of particular industries and products, it is preferable to estimate a full input-output model.

Final energy and useful energy

Just as there are transformation and distribution losses before the raw energy produced finally reaches consuming industries, there are losses within consuming industries which reduce the work or heat actually supplied to them to a fraction of the capacity of their energy input. We thus have two further concepts

is 19 per cent higher than derived by tracing the energy
consumption of a unit output [illegible]
its immediate inputs. Hence it may be interested in indirect
energy requirements of particular industries [illegible]
is preferable to establish [illegible] input-output model.[1]

[illegible]

Case [illegible] Just as there are transformation and distribution losses
before the [illegible] energy [illegible] finally reaches consuming industries
[illegible] there are losses within consuming industries which reduce
[illegible] net [illegible] supplied to them to [illegible] of the
[illegible] of their [illegible] inputs. [illegible] concepts

Sources: Heronden and Pollard [illegible]

Chapter, Leach and Slesser [illegible]

etc. It will be clear now why we aggregate the extracted to find primary energy, and not the energy produced or sold, for the latter will be net of some transformation losses.

A small problem arises when some energy is sold by industries whose main business is not to produce energy - for instance, coke oven gas sold by the iron and steel industry. In calculating primary energy consumption this must be excluded since it is not a natural energy form. In calculating final energy consumption, however, we can hardly exclude the steel industry simply because it sells some energy. The correct procedure would be to deduct from its coking coal input the coal that was transformed into gas for sale.

It is possible to derive the relationship between primary and final energy consumption for a given structure of economy by using input-output methods (Bullard and Herendeen 1975: 268-278). Chapman, Leach and Slessor (1974) have simplified computation by assuming that all non-energy sectors are exogenous. They are then left with a matrix of as many equations as there are energy sectors of the following form:

$$e_i C_i = E_i + \sum e_j C_{ji}$$

where e is the reciprocal of the efficiency of the energy producing sector; C is its output, E is the energy cost of inputs purchased from non-energy sectors, and C_{ji} is the energy purchased by sector i from sector j. This method can lead to

etc. It will be clear now why we aggrega.
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or sold, for the latter will be net of some transformation losses.

A small problem arises when some energy is sold by industries whose main business is not to produce energy - for instance, coke oven gas sold by the iron and steel industry. In calculating primary energy consumption this must be excluded since it is not a natural energy form. In calculating final energy consumption, however, we can hardly exclude the steel industry simply because it sells some energy. The correct procedure would be to deduct from its coking coal input the coal that was transformed into gas for sale.

It is possible to derive the relationship between primary and final energy consumption for a given structure of economy by using input-output methods (Bullard and Herendeen 1975: 268-278). Chapman, Leach and Slessor (1974) have simplified computation by assuming that all non-energy sectors are exogenous. They are then left with a matrix of as many equations as there are energy sectors of the following form:

$$e_i C_i = E_i + \sum e_j C_{ji}$$

where e_i is the reciprocal of the efficiency of the energy producing sector; C is its output, E is the energy cost of inputs purchased from non-energy sectors, and C_{ji} is the energy purchased by sector i from sector j. This method can lead to

etc. It will be clear now why we aggregate the raw energy extracted to find primary energy, and not the energy produced or sold, for the latter will be net of some transformation losses.

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